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STORIES

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The Fruitcake Issue

Kim Mohan

When this edition of the magazine was just about ready to be kicked out of the nest, I started casting about in my brain for a topic for this column. I was thinking holiday, since this is the one magazine every year we can legitimately call a Christmas issue.

But then again, it's really not a Christmas issue. It has a Christmas story (about which more later), but what makes it really special is that it's a Jack Williamson issue (ditto). Taking one more step back, it's a magazine that's unique among all the full-sized issues we've published in the last two and a half years because of the number of ingredients it contains. So, I figured this is a proper time of year to put out what I've decided to call the Fruitcake Issue.

That's not a reflection on the contributors you'll find represented here (although you're free to form your own opinions); it's a seasonal analogy, reflecting the fact that this issue has more pieces of fiction—14—and more different types of stories within that mix than any other magazine we've assembled. If you've never had a genuine fruitcake, made up of so many different ingredients that no two bites have the same flavor, then prepare yourself for the magazine version of that traditional Yuletide treat.

We start by acknowledging the holiday with the first story **Howard Waldrop** has ever had published in this magazine. (Okay, his name was on a collaboration with George R. R. Martin about 15 years ago, but we'll

take a little editorial license and pretend that didn't happen.) "Household Words, Or, The Powers-That-Be" is Howard's way of celebrating a significant literary anniversary: the 150th anniversary of the first publication of *A Christmas Carol*. It's a typical Waldrop story, which is to say that it's like nothing else we've ever read. To go further would be to risk ruining your reading pleasure.

If this issue contained nothing but blank pages in addition to the contributions of **Jack Williamson**, it would still be special. It was 65 years ago, in the December 1928 issue of *Amazing Stories*, when a 20-year-old man with stars in his eyes picked up that magazine and saw his first story, "The Metal Man," committed to print. At a point in life when most people have been retired for at least 20 years, Jack is still doing what he loves to do—and it's a privilege for us to commemorate his anniversary with three offerings: "The Ice Gods," which is the opening section of his novel-in-progress; "The Cosmic Express," the third story of his that was published in these pages; and "Wonder Remembered," a brief reminiscence written by someone with a truly unique perspective on this field.

Next, **Bruce Bethke** is back with "Interior Monologue," a story he calls "a deliberate stretch for me—a scintillating SF horror story with an ending to make your skin crawl, and a rude surprise for everyone who thinks he/she knows what a 'Bruce Bethke' story is like."

Everything **W. Gregory Stewart** sends to this magazine is unavoidably compared with "the button, and what you know"—the piece of long verse from our June 1991 issue that was a Nebula nominee for Best Short Story and won the Rhysling Award for long poem. So, we picked up "A Laureate Recalls" after deciding that it was in the same league as "the button." We're just not sure what league that is. . . .

We've looked at dozens of stories from Russian and Eastern European writers over the last three years, and finally found one that seemed to stand up well in comparison with what English-speaking SF writers are doing. That's "The Experiment" (a double-entendre title if there ever was one) by **Sergey Strelchenko**. The author lives in Volgograd, and was judged one of the best new Soviet SF writers in a contest held in 1989. The story was provided to us by his Canadian translator and agent, Michael McKenny.

Scott Baker is the second of three contributors in this issue who live in a foreign country (if you don't count California). A native of Illinois who lives in Paris, he's a former World Fantasy Award winner for his short story, "Still Life With Scorpion." His first-ever appearance in this magazine is with "Prospero," a haunting tale with a happy ending. Or maybe not.

Pamela D. Hodgson made two sales in the genre before sending us
(Continued on page 14)

Reflections

Robert Silverberg

"Who controls the past," George Orwell told us in 1984, "controls the future: who controls the present controls the past." And so the Party that dominates the world of Orwell's nightmare vision constantly revises history for its own benefit. "If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event," Orwell's Winston Smith observes, "*it never happened*—that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death."

The evil empire on whose sinister premises of information control Orwell based his unforgettable parable has collapsed of its own dull-witted malevolence. At last, at long last, the oppressed citizens of the Soviet Union withdrew their consent from their malign government, and—in one of the great unlikely happenings of human history—it simply went away. But the fundamental principles of thought control on which the Soviet Union was built are older than Stalin, older than Marx. They were with us in the days of the Pharaohs; they will be plaguing us still in the days of the Great Galactic Confederation. They are at work right this minute in the United States.

I'm referring to the ongoing effort to deny that the Holocaust—Hitler's campaign of extermination against the Jews of Europe during World War Two—ever took place. At the core of this program of Orwellian disinformation is a band of neo-Nazi fanatics who live in the dark and twisted hope that the goals of their great martyred leader will some day yet be realized. Which is something that I

doubt very much will happen, any more than it did the first time it was attempted. Still, there's cause for uneasiness here. What brought Hitler to power in 1933 was a mixture of German gullibility, ignorance, muddled patriotism, and a powerful component of resentment over the harsh terms imposed on Germany at the end of what we now call World War One. What is fueling the growing success of the Holocaust deniers is the robust and ever-increasing component of stupidity that seems to be becoming an American national characteristic.

Six million people—mainly Jews, but also Gypsies, homosexuals, marginal people and undesirables of all sorts—died in the Nazi death camps in the early 1940s. That shouldn't really be a debatable point. We have motion-picture documentation of the liberation of these prisons by Allied troops, showing the emaciated survivors in their camp uniforms, the gigantic mounds of corpses stacked like firewood, the incinerators and gas chambers where the endless mass murders were carried out. We have the records of the German high command, authorizing "the final solution to the Jewish problem," as the extermination program was euphemistically called. We have the presence still among us today of living witnesses, people who actually endured years in Auschwitz or Buchenwald or Dachau and bear the tattooed concentration-camp identification numbers on their arms. The immense fact of the German extermination program of the 1940s looms in world history like a dark mountain.

And yet—and yet—

A few months ago it was announced that a Roper Organization poll of 992 American adults and 506 high school students, interviewed in October and November of 1992, revealed that 22 percent of the adults and 20 percent of the high school students thought it seemed possible that the Holocaust had never happened. Twelve percent of the adults and 17 percent of the high school students said that they weren't able to answer the question—that they had so little information about the event that they weren't in a position to tell whether it had or hadn't happened.

What does that mean? If the Holocaust—which took place only a few years ago, relatively speaking—is already so beclouded in our minds that one fifth of us aren't even sure it occurred, then what about the Roman Empire? Did it ever exist, or were the ruins we see in Europe and Africa all faked by Mussolini to bolster Italy's grandeur? For that matter, did Mussolini ever exist? When? Why? And what about Italy itself? Why does a high-school boy in Cleveland or Milwaukee have to believe there is such a place? No one he knows has been there. Mere photographs, and even the claims of supposed witnesses to the existence of an actual far-off country by that name, may not be convincing enough.

When we come down to the issue of sufficient proof, we stumble on ancient philosophical problems. What is sufficient? What is proof? Is there any way of proving that the

world is billions of years old? If I tell you that the world was created in a single moment last Tuesday—complete with fossils, ruins, history books, and our individual memories of the week before last—is there any way that you can prove me wrong?

But formal logic is one thing, and the testimony of those who suffered in Auschwitz and still live among us is something else.

"What have we done?" asked Elie Wiesel, who survived both the Auschwitz and Buchenwald death camps and received the Nobel Prize for his books about his experiences there. "We have been working for years and years. I am shocked that 22 percent—oh, my God."

Actually, it should be no surprise that the high school students in that poll were vague on the subject of the Holocaust. It took place, after all, in their grandparents' time, which is prehistory to them. How many of them, I wonder, know whether the Civil War happened before or after the two World Wars, or if it happened at all? How many could name the Presidents of the United States in order from Roosevelt to Bush? Or even those from Carter to Bush? A survey taken recently at Ivy League colleges showed that three quarters of the students questioned were unable to identify the author of the phrase "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" as Abraham Lincoln, and that half of them could not provide the names of their state's two Senators. (Can you?) We expect ignorance from the young, these days; we are astounded when they know that Switzerland is a country in Europe, or that Montana is west of Ohio.

But the adults in that poll who had their doubts about the Holocaust's reality—many of them 60 years old, or more—

Something more sinister than mere ignorance is at work here. We are entering Orwellian territory. History is being rewritten by people with agendas. Just as certain "scholars" have begun to tell us that the Pharaonic Egyptians were black-skinned people,

in defiance of all historical evidence, just as only last year Christopher Columbus was transformed from a hero into a villain by revisionist "historians," so too do we have in our midst a little group of covert Nazi sympathizers who are attempting to further their racial and political views by taking advantage of American gullibility to befog the historical record of the Holocaust.

For example, a group calling itself the Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust has declared that "the figure of six million Jewish deaths is an irresponsible exaggeration" and asserts that the gas chambers at the Nazi prisons were used merely as "life-saving" fumigation chambers in which lice and other pests were removed from the clothing of the prisoners. The ovens in which hundreds of thousands were roasted alive are turned, by these Holocaust deniers, into "crematoria" for the bodies of internees who died of disease. And why were Jews being interned by the Nazis in the first place? Simply as defensive tactics, we are told, to prevent these enemies of the German state from perpetrating acts of sabotage, just as in the United States at the same time citizens of Japanese ancestry were being rounded up and placed in detention camps.

(I should add, for the benefit of the history-impaired, that we really *did* round up and imprison Japanese-American citizens during the Second World War, in a shameful and overemotional reaction to the surprise Japanese attack on our fleet at Pearl Harbor. But the resemblance to the German death camps ends there.)

The Holocaust revisionists, when they first emerged in the 1970s, were widely dismissed as crackpots in a class with those who insist that the entire United States space program, up to and including the landings on the moon, was a hoax. But they have persistently pushed their ideas into prominence, arguing that "different perspectives" on great events have a right to be heard, and getting relatively little opposition at a time when "multiculturalism" and "tolerance of

minority views" are trendy educational notions. And in this strange era, where Presidential candidates campaign on television talk shows and issues of great public moment are decided by polling the ignorant, those who argue that no Nazi extermination program ever happened have succeeded not only in being heard but in getting a fifth of the Roper Organization's poll sample to believe that they may have a case.

They have no case, say I. They are malicious liars, twisting the facts in the hope of sanitizing the monstrous deeds of their idol, Hitler, and laying the groundwork for new purges of inconvenient opponents of their ideas. And they say, No, no, we are merely trying to get at the truth.

What is truth? asked jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer. If half the population is hopelessly ignorant and the rest of us are willing to give a fair hearing to anybody who demands one, no matter how blatantly foolish or downright evil their point of view, and if anyone's opinion is as good as the next guy's, what chance is there for the survival of civilization? I say that the Holocaust happened, that Italy actually exists at this moment, that a bearded man named Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States a century and a half ago. You reply that I can't prove any of that; and there the discussion has to end.

But if no one believes anything, and no one knows anything much, everything is cast into doubt. *Everything*. Which allows those who are immune to doubt to impose their will on their goofier and more tentative-minded neighbors. We have entered the era, it seems, of the universal *reductio ad absurdum*, where nothing is permanently true, where every fact is subject to complete revision. "All that was needed," says Orwell, "was an unending series of victories over your own memory. 'Reality control,' they called it; in Newspeak, 'doublethink.'"

Yes, Orwell had it right, forty-five years ago. Who controls the past controls the future. ♦



Household Words

Or
The Powers-That-Be

Howard Waldrop

Illustration by
Kent Bash

"His theory of life was entirely wrong. He thought men ought to be buttered up, and the world made soft and accommodating for them, and all sorts of fellow have turkey for their Christmas dinner . . ."

— Thomas Carlyle

"He was the first to find out the immense spiritual power of the Christmas turkey."

— Mrs. Oliphant

* * *

Under a deep cerulean November sky, the train stopped on a turn near the road one half-mile outside the town of Barchester.

Two closed carriages waited on the road. Passengers leaned out the train windows and watched as a small man in a suit as brown as a Norfolk biffin stepped down from the doorway at the end of the third railcar.

Men waved their hats, women their scarves. "Hurrah, Charlie!" they yelled. "Hoorah, Mr. Dickens! Hooray for Boz!"

The small man, accompanied by two others, limped across the cinders to a group of men who waited, hats in hand, near the carriages. He turned, doffed his stovepipe hat to the train and waved to the cheering people.

Footmen loaded his traveling case and the trunk of props from the train into the last carriage.

The train, with barely a lurch, moved smoothly on down the tracks toward the cathedral tower of the town, hidden from view by trees. There a large crowd, estimated at more than 3,000, would be waiting for the author, to cheer him and watch him alight.

The welcoming committee had met him here to obviate that indignity, and to take him by a side street to his hotel, avoiding the crowds.

When the men were all in, the drivers at the fronts of the carriages released their brakes, and the carriages made their way quickly down the road toward town.

Promptly at 8 P.M. the lights in the Workingman's Hall came up to full brilliance.

On stage were three deep magenta folding screens, the center one parallel to the audience, the two wings curved in slightly toward them. The stage curtains had been drawn in to touch the wings of the screen. Directly in front of the center panel stood a waist-high, four-legged small table. At the audience's right side of the desk was a raised wooden block; at its left, on a small lower projection, stood a glass and a sweating carafe of ice water; next to the water was an ivory letter opener and a white linen handkerchief. The top of the table was covered with a fringed magenta cloth that hung below the tabletop only an inch or so.

Without preamble, Charles Dickens walked with a slight limp in from the side of the stage and took his place behind the desk, carrying in his hand a small octavo volume. When he stood behind the thin-legged table his whole body, except for the few inches across his waist, was fully visible to the audience.

There came a thunderous roar of applause, wave after wave, then as one the audience rose to its feet, joyed for the very sight of the man who had brought so much warmth and wonder to their beater-sides and hearths.

He stood unmoving behind the desk, looking over them with his bright brown eyes above the now-familiar (due to the frontispiece by Mr. Frith in his latest published book, *Pip's Expectations*) visage with its high balding forehead, the shock of brownish hair combed to the left, the large pointed beard and connected thick mustache. He wore a brown formal evening suit, the jacket with black velvet lapels worn open showing his vest and watch-chain. His shirt was white, with an old-fashioned neck-stock in place of the new button-on collars, and he wore an even more old-fashioned bow tie, with two inches of end hanging down from the bows.

After two full minutes of applause, he nodded to the audience and they slowed, then stopped, sitting down with much clatter of canes and rustle of clothing and scraping of chairs, a scattering of coughs. From far back in the hall came a set of nervous hiccups, quickly smothered.

"My dear readers," said Dickens, "you do me more honor than I can stand. Since it is nearing the holiday season, I have chosen my reading especially as suits that most Christian of seasons." Murmurs went around the hall. "As I look around me at this fine Barchester crowd, I see many of you in the proud blue and red uniforms of Her Majesty's Power Service, and I must remind you that I was writing in a time, more than two decades gone, when things in our country were neither as Christian as we should have liked, nor as fast and modern as we thought. To mention nothing of a type of weather only the most elderly—and I count myself among them—remember with absolutely no regrets whatsoever." Laughter. "As I read, should you my auditors be moved to express yourselves—in matters of appreciation and applause, tears, or indeed hostility"—more laughter—"please be assured you may do so without distracting or discomfiting me in any adverse way."

He poured a small amount of water from carafe to glass and drank. "Tonight, I shall read to you *The Christmas Garland*."

There were oohs and more applause, the ones who guessed before nodding in satisfaction to themselves and their neighbors.

The house lights dimmed until only Dickens, the desk and the central magenta panel were illuminated.

He opened the book in his hand, and without looking at it said, "*The Christmas Garland*. Holly Sprig the First. 'No doubt about it, Marley was dead as a doorknob . . .'"

Dickens barely glanced at the prompt-book in his hand as he read. It was the regular edition of *The Christmas Garland*, the pages cut out and pasted in the center of larger bound octavo leaves. There were deletions and underlinings in red, blue and yellow inks—notes to himself, directions for changes of voice, alternate wordings for lines. The whole had been shortened by more than a third, to fit into an hour and a half for these paid readings. When he had begun his charity readings more than ten years ago, the edition as printed had gone on more than two

hours and a half. Through deletions and transpositions, he reduced it to its present length without losing effect or sense.

He moved continually as he read, now using the letter opener as Eben Mizer's quill, then the block of wood—three heavy blows with his left hand—as a doorknocker. He moved his fingers together, the book between them, to simulate Cratchitt's attempts to warm himself at a single glowing coal. His voice was slow, cold and drawn as Eben Mizer; solemnly cheerful as the gentleman from the charity; merry and bright as Mizer's nephew. The audience laughed or drew inward on itself as he read the opening scenes.

* * *

"For I am that Spirit of Christmases Past," said the visitant. "I am to show you things that Were. Take my hand."

Eben Mizer did so, and they were out the window casing and over the night city in a slow movement. They flew slowly into the darkness to the north.

And then they were outside a bouse and shop, looking through the window at a large man in old-fashioned waistcoat and knee-breeks, with his spectacles pushed back on his forehead.

"Why, old Mr. Fezziwig, to whom I was 'prenticed!" said Eben Mizer.

"Ho!" said Fezziwig. "Seven o'clock! Away with your quills! Roll back the carpets! Move those desks against the walls! It's Christmas Eve and no one works! . . ."

* * *

As Dickens acted out preparations for the party, his eyes going to the prompt-book only twice, he remembered the writing of this, his most famous story. It had been late October of the year 1843. He was halfway through the writing of *Martin Sweeneybugg*, had just, in fact, sent the young hero to America—the place he himself had returned from late in 1842, the place that had become the source of one long squeal of protest when he had published *Notes on the Americans* early in the year. He had gone from triumph to disdain in less than six months. For the first time in his life, the monthly numbers had been a chore for him—he was having troubles with *Sweeneybugg*, and the sales were disappointing. As they had been for *Gabriel Vardon: The Locksmith of London* of two years before. (The Americans who were outraged with his travel book were the same who had named a species of Far Western trout after Gabriel Vardon's daughter.) Between finishing the November number of *Sweeneybugg* on October 18, and having to start the next on November 3, he had taken one of the steam-trains to the opening of the Manchester Institute of that city. Sitting on the platform, waiting his turn to speak, the idea for *The Christmas Garland* had come to him unbidden. He could hardly contain himself, waiting until after the speeches and the banquet to return to the quiet of his hotel to think it through.

And since he had a larger and larger family each year to support, more indigent brothers and sisters, in-laws and his importunate mother and father, he conceived the story as a separate book, to be sold at Christmas as were many of the holiday annuals, keepsakes and books of remembrance. Illustrated, of course, with cuts by John

Leech. The whole plan was a fire in his mind that night and all the way back to London the next day. He went straight to Chapman and Hall and presented the notion to them. They agreed with alacrity, and began ordering up stock and writing advertisements.

He had had no wild success since the two books that had made his reputation, *Tales of the Nimrod Club* and *Oliver Twist*, parts of them written simultaneously, in overlapping monthly numbers, six years before. He had envisioned for *The Christmas Garland* sales that would earn him £3000 or more.

* * *

"Show me no more, no more!" said Eben Mizer. "These are things long past; the alternate miseries and joys of my youth. Those times are all gone. We can no more change them than stop the tides!"

"These are things as they were," said the Spirit of Christmases Past. "These things are unchangeable. They have happened."

"I had forgotten both pleasure and heartache," said Mizer. "I had forgotten the firewood, the smoke, the horses."

"In another night, as Marley said, you shall be visited by another, who will show you things as they are now. Prepare," said the Spirit. As with the final guttering of a candle, it was gone. Eben Mizer was back in his bed, in his cold bedchamber, in the dark. He dropped his head to the horsehair pillow, and slept.

* * *

Twenty-two years had gone by since Dickens wrote the words he read. He remembered his disappointment with the sales of *The Christmas Garland*—"Disappointment?! Disappointment!" yelled his friend Macready, the actor, when he had complained "Disappointment at selling 20,000 copies in six days! Disappointment, Charlie?" It was not that it had not sold phenomenally, but that it was such a well-made book—red cover, gilt-edged pages, four hand-tinted cuts, the best type and paper, and because of Dickens's insistence that everyone have one, priced far too low—that his half-copyright earnings through January 1844 only came to £347 6s 2p when he had counted on thousands. That had been the disappointment.

Dickens spoke on. This was the ninety-fourth public reading of *The Christmas Garland*, his most popular, next to the trial scene from *The Nimrod Club*, and the death of little Dombey. At home these days he worked on an abridgement of the scenes, including that of the great sea-storm, from *The Copperfield Record of the World As It Rolled*, which he thought would make a capital dramatic reading, perhaps to be followed by a short comic scene, such as his reading of Mrs. Gamp, the hit of the otherwise disappointing *Martin Sweeneybugg*.

What a winter that had been . . . the hostile American press, doing the monthly numbers of *Sweeneybugg*, writing and seeing to the publication of *The Christmas Garland* in less than six weeks, preparing his growing family—his wife, an ever-increasing number of children, his sister-in-law Georgina Hogarth, the servants and dogs—for the coming sojourn to Italy, severing his ties with *Bentley's Miscellany*, thinking of starting a daily newspaper of

a liberal slant, walking each night through London streets five, ten, fifteen miles because his brain was hot with plans and he could not sleep or rest. He was never to know such energies again.

There was his foot now, for instance. He believed its present pain was a nervous condition brought on by walking twelve miles one night years ago through the snow. The two doctors who had diagnosed it as gout were dismissed, a third was brought in who diagnosed it as a nervous condition brought on by walking through the snow. Before each of his readings, his servant John had to put upon the bare foot a fomentation of the poppy, which allowed him to put on a sock and shoe, and make it the two hours standing up.

He still had a wife, though he had not seen her in six years; they had separated after twenty-three years of marriage and nine children. Some of the living children and Georgina had remained with Dickens, taking his side against the mother and sister. One boy was in the Navy, another in Australia, two others in school. Only one child, Mamie—"young Tinderbox," as Dickens called her—visited freely between the two households, taking neither side.

The separation had of course caused scandal, and Dickens's break with Anthony Trollope. They belonged to the same clubs. Trollope had walked into one; several scandalized members were saying that Dickens had taken his sister-in-law as mistress. "No such thing," said Trollope. "It's a young actress."

So it was; Trollope said he was averting a larger outrageous lie with the truth; Dickens had not seen it that way.

Her name was Ellen Ternan. She and Dickens had performed in charity theatricals together, *The Frozen Deep* and Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*. She was of a stage family—her mother and two sisters were actresses. Her sister Fanny had married Anthony Trollope's brother Tom in Florence, Italy, where she had gone to be his children's tutor after the death of Tom's wife Theodosia.

The world had been a much more settled place when the young fire-eating Boz had published his first works, and had remained so for some time afterwards. But look at it now.

The Americans had just finished blowing the heads off first themselves, and then their President; had thrown the world in turmoil—which side should we take?—for four years, destroying a large part of their manpower and manufacturing capabilities. What irked Dickens was not their violent war—they had it coming—but that he would not be able to arrange a reading tour there for at least another year. An American had shown up two weeks ago at his publisher's office with an offer of \$10,000, cash on the barrelhead, if Dickens would agree to a three-month tour of seventy-five readings. Both his friend Forster and the old actor Macready advised him against it for reasons of his health. Besides his foot, there had been some tightening in his chest for the last year or so, and his bowels had been in straitened circumstances long before that.

Ah, but what a trouper! He found even with his mind wandering he had not lost his place, or missed a change of voice or character, nor given the slightest hint that his

whole being was not in the reading being communicated to his forward-leaning, intent auditors.

Eben Mizer opened his eyes. How long had he slept? Was the Spirit of Christmas Past that bit of undigested potato, that dollop of mustard? he thought.

There came to his bedchamber a slight crackling sound; the air was suffused with a faint blue glow. Mizer reached into the watch-catch above his bed and took down his timepiece. It was 12:00, he saw by the glow, which slowly brightened about his bed. Twelve! Surely not noon! And not the midnight before, when the Spirit of Christmas Past had come. Had he slept the clock round, all through the sham-bug Christmas Day? He grasped the bedclothes to haul himself out onto the cold bare floor. The overall bright glow coalesced in the corner nearest the chair.

The popping became louder, like faraway fireworks over the Thames on Coronation Day, or the ice slowly breaking on a March day. There was a smell of hot metal in the air; the sharp odor before a thunderstorm, but without heat or dampness. And then it was there, in the room behind the chair!

It was a looming figure, far above normal height, shrouded in a gown of copper and mica, and above its head, at its top, glowing green and jagged with purple, was one of Faraday's Needles. ***

The listeners jerked back, as always. There was a rustle of crinoline and starch as they hunkered back down. Most knew the story as they knew their own hearts, but the effect on them was always the same.

Dickens knew why, for when he had written those words more than two decades before, his own hair had stood on end as if he were in the very presence of the Motility Factor itself.

It was from that moment on in the writing of *The Christmas Garland* that he had never wavered, never slowed down; it was that moment when, overcome by tiredness at his desk, he had flung himself and his hat and cane out into the (in those days) dark London night, and had walked all dawn, out to Holborn up Duckett Lane, across to Seven Sisters, and back up and down Vauxhall Bridge Road, to come in again just as the household was rising, and throw himself fully clothed across his bed, to sleep for an hour, and then, rising, go back to his ink bottle and quills.

The crackling sound grew louder as the Spirit shook his raiments, and a spark danced between the Needle and the ceiling, leaving a bright blue spot there to slowly fade as Eben Mizer watched, fascinated as a bird before a snake.

"Know that I am the Spirit of Christmas Current, Eben Mizer. Know that I am in the form that the men who hire your accountancy worship, as you worship the money that flows, like the Motive Force itself, from them to you."

"What do you wish of me?" asked Eben.
The Spirit laughed, and a large gust of blue washed over the room, as if day had come and gone in an instant.

"Wish? Nothing. I am only to show you what takes place this Christmas."

"You mean this past day?"

"Past? Oh, very well, as you will!" The Spirit laughed again. "Take my hand."

"I will be volarized in an instant!" said Mizer.

"No, you shall not." It held out an empty sleeve. Mizer felt invisible fingers take his. "Come," said the Spirit. "Hold on to me."

There was a feeling of lightness in Mizer's head; he became a point of light, as the flash of a meteor across the heavens, or the dot of a lightning-bug against an American night, and they were outside his nephew's house in the daylight.

"As before, you are neither seen nor heard," said the Spirit of Christmases Current. "Walk through this wall with me." They did, but Mizer had the sensation that instead of walking directly through they had, in a twinkling, gone up the windowpane, across the roof tiles, down the heated air of the chimney, across the ceiling, and into the room just inside the window, too fast to apprehend. The effect was the same, from outside to inside, but Eben Mizer had the memory of doing it the long way. . . .

Dickens's voice became high, thin and merry as he took on the younger tones of Mizer's nephew, his nephew's wife, their in-laws and guests at the party where they were settling in for a game of charades before the Christmas meal.

Actors on the stage of the time said that Dickens was the greatest actor of his age; others thought it beneath his dignity to do the readings—authors should be paid to publish books, not read them for money. Some of his readings he had dropped after they did not have the desired effect—comic or pathetic or terrific—on the audience. Others he had prepared but never given, because they had proved unsatisfying to him. By the time any reading had joined his repertoire, he had rehearsed it twenty-five times before its debut.

He knew that he was a good actor—if he had not gone into journalism, covering the courts and the Parliament when a youth, he would have gone on the stage—but he knew he was not great. He knew it was the words and the acting that had made his readings such a success. No matter how many times they had read and heard them, audiences still responded to them as if they had come newly dry from his pen that very morning.

Dickens paused for another drink from the glass, mopped his brow with the handkerchief that a moment before had been Mizer's nightcap. The audience waited patiently, the slight hum of the fans in the ceiling purring to let the accumulated warmth of 1,500 bodies escape into the cold night. The glow from the selenium lights against the magenta screen added nothing to the heat.

He put the glass down, eyes twinkling, and went back to his reading.

"If only my uncle were here," said his nephew.

"Oh, why bother?" asked his pretty young wife. "He's probably at his office counting out more profits from the

Greater Cumberland and Smythe-Jones Motility Factory, or the United Batchford Motive-Force Delivery Service. And no doubt got poor Bob Cratchitt there with him, chained to his stool . . ."

"Hush, please," asked the nephew.

"Well, it's true. A man like Eben Mizer. He does sums for seventeen different power-brokers, yet his office is still lit with candles! He lets poor Cratchitt freeze in the outer office. And poor Bob with the troubles he has at home. Your uncle should be ashamed of what he pays him, of how he himself lives. . . ."

"But, after all," said her father the greengrocer, "it is a free market, and he pays what the trade will bear."

"That's wrong too," said the young wife, hands on hips. "How the workmen are to better themselves if their wages are so low they have to put their children working at such early ages is beyond me. How are they to make ends meet? How are they to advance themselves if there are no better wages in the future, perhaps even lower ones, and they can't live decently now?"

"The Tories won't be happy if women such as yourself get the suffrage," said her father with a laugh. "Neither would anyone on the board of directors of a motive-power company!"

"If I did not love you as a father," said the young wife, "I should be very cross with you."

"Come, come," said her husband the nephew. "It's Christmas Day. Where's your charity?"

"Where's your uncle's?"

"He does as the world wills," said the nephew.

"Only more so," said another guest, and they all laughed, the young wife included.

"Well, I invited him," said Mizer's nephew. "It's up to him to come or no. I should welcome him with all the gladness of the season."

"As would I," said his wife. "Only you might as well wish for Christian charity to be carried on every day, in every way, throughout the year, in every nation on Earth!"

"Why show me this?" asked Eben Mizer of the Spirit. "No love is lost betwixt my nephew's wife and myself. My nephew means very well, but he does not grasp the full principles of business to his bosom. He has done well enough, he *could* do much better."

"Come," said the Spirit of Christmases Current, grabbing Mizer's hand in its unseen own. There was another crackle of blue lightning, and they were away, up a nail, across the roof, down the gutter pipe and off into the day.

After this reading, Dickens had two more in the provinces, then back to St. James Hall in London for the holiday series. He would read not only *The Christmas Garland* there, but also both *The Cakes and The Haunted Man*, his last Christmas book from back in 1848.

In London he would also oversee the Christmas supplement of *Household Words*, his weekly magazine. This year, on a theme superintended by Dickens, and including one short story by him, was the conceit of Christmas at Mugby Junction, a station where five railway lines con-

verged. Leaning over the junction would be the bright blue towers of the H.M.P.S., from which the trains drew their force. Indeed, Wilkie Collins's contribution was the story of a boy, back in London, who proudly wore the crisp blue and red uniform, imagining, as he sat on duty with his headset strapped on, Mugby Junction and the great rail lines that he powered, on one of which was coming to London, and to whom he would be introduced on his fortnight off duty, his brother-in-law's cousin, a girl Dickens had, of course, made Collins rewrite all the precious parts, and bring Father Christmas in for a scratch behind the ears—else it might as well take place during August Bank Holiday!" said Dickens in a terse note to Collins when the manuscript had caught up with him at his hotel in Aberdeen yesterday.

Just now, the letter opener in his hand had become the cane of old Mr. Jayhew as he walked toward the Cratchitts' door.

* * *

Such a smell, like a bakery and a laundry and a pub all rolled together! The very air was thick with Christmas, so much so that Eben Mizer wondered how he detected the smells, unseen and unheard as he was, as the sputtering blue and purple Spirit stood beside him.

"Where's your father?" asked Mrs. Cratchitt.

"He's just gone to fetch Giant Timmy," said the youngest daughter.

"Your brother's name is Tim," said Mrs. Cratchitt. "It's just the neighbors call him that," she added with a smile.

The door came open without a knock, and there stood Katy, their eldest, laden with baskets and a case, come all the way from Cambridge, where she worked as a nanny "Mother!" she said. "Oh, the changes on the trains! I thought I should never reach here!"

"Well," said Mrs. Cratchitt, hugging her, "you're here, that's what matters. Now it will be a very merry Christmas!"

"I must have waited in ten stations," said Katy, taking off her shawl, then hugging her sisters and giving them small presents. "Every line its own train, every one with its own motive-car. Absolutely nothing works right on Christmas Eve!" She looked around. "Where's father? Where's Tim?"

"Your father's off fetching him . . . and his pay," said Mrs. Cratchitt.

"When can I go to work, mummy?" asked Bohhy, pulling at his pinafore.

"Not for a long time yet," said Mrs. Cratchitt. "Perhaps you'll be the first one in the family goes to University."

"Don't tease him so," said Katy.

"Well, it's possible," said his mother.

"Not with what Mr. Mizer pays father, and what I can send when I can, nor even with Tim's pay," said Katy. "And unless I am mistaken, his rates have gone down."

"All of them are down," said Mrs. Cratchitt, "what with the Irish and the potato blight. The streets here are full of red hair and beards, all looking for work."

There was a sound outside in the street, and the door came open, Mr. Cratchitt's back appearing as he turned. "This way. No, no, this way." He tugged twice, and then was followed.

Behind Mr. Cratchitt came Tim. He weighed fifteen stone though he was but twelve years old. He wore a white shapeless smock, with the name *Wilborn Mot. Ser.* written in smudged ink across the left chest, and white pants. His skin was translucent, as if made of waxed parchment, and his head had taken on a slight pearlike appearance, not helped by the short bowl-shape into which his hair had been cut. There were two round notches in the bowl-cut, just above the temples, and small bruised and slightly burnt circles covered the exposed skin there.

But it was the eyes Mizer noticed most—the eyes, once blue-green like his father's, had faded to whitish grey; they seemed both starting from their sockets in amazement, and to be taking in absolutely nothing, as if they were white china doorknobs stuck below his brows.

"Tim?" yelled Katy. She ran to him and hugged him as best she could. He slowly lifted one of his arms to wrap around her shoulders.

"Oh! You're hurting!" she said, and pulled away.

"Here, sit here Tim," said Bob Cratchitt, making motions towards the largest chair. It groaned as the boy sat down.

"There is a small bonus for Christmas," said Mr. Cratchitt. "Not much." He patted the corner of the pay envelope in his pocket. "Not enough to equal even the old pay rates, but something. They've been working especially hard. The paymaster at Wilborn was telling me they've been hired as motive power for six new factories in the last month alone."

"Oh, Tim," said Katy. "It's so good to see you and have you home for Christmas, even for just the day."

He looked at her for a long time, then went back to watching the fireplace.

Then there was the steaming sound of a goose coming out of the oven, hissing in its own gravy, and of a pudding going in, and Mr. Cratchitt leapt up and started the gin-and-apple punch, with its pieces of pineapple, and oranges, and a full stick of cinnamon bark.

Halfway through the meal, when healths were going round, and Mr. Mizer's name mentioned, and the Queen's, Giant Timmy sat forward suddenly in the big chair that had been pulled up to the table, and said, "God Bless . . . us all each . . . every . . ." Then he went quiet again, staring at his glass.

"That's right, that's exactly right, Tim," said Bob Cratchitt. "God Bless Us All, Each and Every One!"

Then the Spirit and Eben Mizer were outside in the snow, looking in at the window.

"I have nothing to do with this," said Eben. "I pay Cratchitt as good as he could get, and I have *nothing* to do, whatsoever, with the policies of the companies for whom I do the accounts." He looked at the Spirit of Christmases Current, who said nothing, and in a trice, he was back in his bedchamber, and the blue-purple glow was fading from the air. Exhausted as if he had swum ten miles off Blackpool, he dropped to unconsciousness against his stiff pillow.

* * *

Dickens grew rapidly tired as he read, but he dared not now let down either himself or his audience.

In many ways that younger self who had written the story had been a dreamer, but he had been also a very practical man in business and social matters. That night in Manchester as he waited for Mr. Disraeli to wind down, and as the idea for *The Christmas Garland* ran through his head, he thought he had seen a glimpse of a simple social need, and with all the assurance and arrogance of youth, what needed to be done. If he could strike the hammer blow with a Christmas tale, so much the better. So he had.

* * *

The Spirit of Christmases Yet to Come was a small imp-like person, jumping here and there. It wore no mica or copper, only a tight garment and a small cloth skullcap from which stood up only a single wire, slightly glowing at the tip. First the Spirit was behind the chair, then in front, then above the bureau, then at one corner of the bed.

Despite its somewhat comic manner, the Spirit frightened Eben Mizer as the others had not. He drew back, afraid, for the face below the cap was an upturned grin, whether from mirth or in a rictus of pain he did not know. The imp said nothing but held out a gutta-percha covered wand for Mizer to grasp, as if it knew the very touch of its nervous hand would cause instant death, of the kind Mizer had feared from the Spirit before. Mizer took the end of the wand; instantly they were on the ceiling, then out in the hall, back near the chair, then inside something dark, then out into the night.

"I know you are to show me the Christmas Yet to Come, as Marley said. But is it Christmas as it *Will Be*, or only Christmas Yet to Come if I *keep on this way*?"

The imp was silent. They were in the air near the Serpentine, then somewhere off Margate, then back at the confluence of the Thames and Isis, then somewhere over the river near the docks. As Eben Mizer looked down, a slow harge transformed into a sleek boat going an unimaginable speed across the water. As he watched, it went in a long fast circle and crashed into a wharf, spewing bodies like toy soldiers from a bumped table.

He looked out towards the city. London towered up and up and up, till the highest buildings were level with his place in the middle of the air. And above the highest buildings stood giant towers of every kind and shape, humming and glowing blue in the air. Between the tall stone and iron buildings ran aerial railways, level after crossing level of them, and on every one some kind of train; some sleek, some boxlike, moving along their spans. The city was a blaze of light; every corner on every street glowed, all the buildings were lit. Far to the horizon the lights stretched, past all comprehension, lights in a million houses, more lights than all the candles and lamps and new motility-lights in Eben Mizer's world could make if all lit at once. There was no end to the glow—the whole river valley was one blue sheen that hurt his eyes.

Here and there, though, the blue flickered. As he watched, some trains gathered speed on their rails three hundred feet above the ground, and on others higher or lower they stopped completely. Then he and the imp were closer to one of the trains that had come to a halt.

The passengers were pressed to the windows of one of the carriages, which had no engines or motive-cars attached, and then in a flash around a building came a spotted snake of light that was another train, and there was a great grinding roar as the two became one. The trains were a wilted salad of metal and wheels, and people flew by like hornet larvae from a nest hit by a shotgun blast. They tumbled without sound down the crevasses between the buildings, and cracked windows and masonry followed them as rails snapped like stretched string.

Something was wrong with the sky, for the blue light flickered on and off, as did the lights of the city, and the top of one of the towers began to glow faint red, as if it were a mulling poker.

Then he and the imp were on the ground, near a churchyard, and as they watched, with a grinding clang that died instantly, a train car from above went through the belfry of the church. Boulders, whose screams grew higher and louder, thudded into the sacred ground, snapping off tombstones, giving statues a clothing of true human skin.

The imp of Christmases Yet to Come drew nearer a wooden cross in the pauper's section, pointing. Eben Mizer stood transfixed, watching the towers of buildings, stone attached to iron, and the twisting cords of the railways above come loose and dangle before breaking off and falling.

With a deafening roar a ground-level railway train came ploughing through the churchyard wall, tearing a great gouge in the earth and, shedding passengers like an otter shakes water, burst through the opposite wall, ending its career further out of sight. It left a huge furrow through the cemetery, and at the cemetery's exact center a quiet, intact railway car in which nothing moved. Here and there in the torn earth a coffin stood on end, or lay cut in two, exactly half an anatomy lesson.

Eben Mizer saw that one of the great towers nearby had its side punched open, as neat a cut as with a knife through a hoop of cheese. From this opening shambled an army, if ever army such as this could be.

They were huge, and their heads too were huge, and the sides of their heads smoked, the hair of some was smouldering, which they did not notice, until some quite burst afire, and then those slowly sank back to the ground. Others walked in place, only thinking their thin legs were moving them forward. A higher part of the tower fell on twenty or thirty of them with no effect on the others who were walking before or behind them.

Great fires were bursting out in the buildings overhead. A jiggled bolt lanced into the Thames, turning it to steam: a return bolt blew the top from a tower, which fell away from the river, taking two giant buildings with it.

A train shot out of the city a thousand feet up. As it left, the entire valley winked out into a darkness lit only by dim flares from fires. Mizer heard the train hit in Southwark in the pitch blackness before his night vision came back.

All around there was moaning, the small moaning of people, larger ones of twisted cooling metal, great ones of buildings before they snapped and fell.

He began to make out shapes in the churchyard slowly, here and there. There were fires on bodies of people, on the wooden seats of train benches. A humming chesterfield fell onto the railway car, showering sparks.

The staggering figures came closer; they were dressed in loose clothing. By the light of fires he saw their bulbous shapes. One drew near, and turned towards him.

Its eyes, all their eyes, were like pale doorknobs. They moved towards him. The closest, its lips trying to say words, lifted its arms. Others joined it, and they came on slowly, their shoulders moving ineffectually back and forth; they shuffled from one foot to the other, getting closer and closer. They lifted their white soft grub-worm fingers towards him—

WHAP!!! Dickens brought his palm down hard on the wooden block. The whole audience jumped. Men and women both yelped. Then nervous laughter ran through the hall.

Eben Mizer opened the shutter. The boy in the street had another snowball ready to throw when he noticed the man at the window. He turned to run.

"Wait, boy!" Eben Mizer called. "Wait! What day is this?"

"What? Why, sir, it's Christmas Day."

"Bless me," said Eben Mizer. "Of course. The Spirits have done it all in one night. Of course they have. There's still time. Boy! You know that turkey in the shop down the street?..."

His foot was painting him mightily. He shifted his weight to the other leg, his arms drawing the giant shape of the man-sized turkey in the air. He was Eben Mizer, and he was the boy, and he was also the poulterer, running back with the turkey.

And from that day on, he was a man with a mission, a most Christian one, and he took to his bosom his nephew's family, and that of all mankind, but most especially that of Boh Cratchitt, and that most special case of Giant Timmy—who did not die—and took to his heart those great words, "God Bless us all each every..."

Charles Dickens closed his book and stood bathed in the selenium glow, and waited for the battering love that was applause. ♦

The Fruitcake Issue

(Continued from page 4)

"A Taste of Success," but there's a good chance that we got this story into print soon enough to make it her first publication in an SF magazine. Pam attended Clarion '92, and of that experience she says, "It only changed my life." Judging by the marvelous flavor of her contribution to the fruitcake issue, the change was all for the better.

Elisabeth Vonarburg got us hooked on her "Voyager" tales with "The Knot," which we used in the March 1993 issue. Now comes another story in the same vein—probably not a sequel, certainly not a prequel—that she calls "Chambered Nautilus," and ends with a question we should all ask ourselves once in a while. Elisabeth, a native French speaker who lives in Quebec, is primarily known for her novels but has also had a number of short stories published in French in addition to her two appearances in this magazine.

Margaret Ball had something she

wanted to say about Mattel's advertising practices, and she came up with the perfect (ahem) vehicle in the form of "Totally Spaced Barbie," her first story for us. If you don't know the significance of the remark about "astrofagion class," ask anyone under the age of 12 who owns a Barbie doll.

George Zebrowski demonstrates his versatility—in subject matter as well as in length—with "Passing Nights," a tight little story that has about one-fiftieth as many words as his "Behind the Stars," which we serialized in our June and July issues. His most recent appearance was just last month, with the novelette "In the Distance, and Ahead in Time."

If you do any short-story reading outside the field, the chances are good that you've come across something by Michael Beres before. He's had work in *Cosmopolitan* and *Playboy*, and is a fairly frequent contributor to *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine*. It should go without saying, but, for the record, "Time and

Tide" is his first sale to a professional SF periodical.

Eleanor Arnason hasn't done a lot of short work in the last several years, which makes the appearance of "The Semen Thief" that much more of a cause for celebration. Eleanor does have a solid reputation as a novelist, particularly for *A Woman of the Iron People*, the first volume of which was a co-winner of the initial Tiptree Award.

Perhaps the most prolific poet in the SF/fantasy genre, Bruce Boston brings this issue to a close with "The Last Existentialist." He has published more than 700 pieces of writing in a career going back almost 20 years, and this long poem is quite simply the best thing we've ever seen with his name on it.

That's it. Open anywhere—your chance of hitting the first page of a story or feature is about one in five—flatten gently, and enjoy until done. ♦

The Ice Gods

Jack Williamson

1

His mother christened him Carlos Corales Carbajal Santiago Mondragon.

"A large name, *Carlito*," his father told him when he was old enough to echo it all, "for a very small *niníto*. You must grow to fit it."

They lived in a poor *pueblito* called Cuerno del Oro in the Chihuahua Mountains a few hundred kilometers southwest of the smoggy sprawl of Juarez. Cuerno del Oro meant horn of gold, but any the barren hills had ever hid was dug and gone two hundred years ago. The thin soil now gave more rocks than wealth.

He saw no way to earn that great name till he began to hear Don Ignacio Morelos speak of the stars. Don Diego had gone north and found employment at the nest of the starbirds called White Sands. He came home on holidays with gifts for his family and tales of the roaring birds that carried men off the Earth.

One year there was even a gift for Carlos, a postcard picture of a great metal thing that climbed over bright rocks under a dead black sky on long lever-legs with fat-tired wheels for feet. "*La araña de la luna*," he called it. The spider of the Moon.



Illustration by James C. Smith

"Muchas gracias, Don Ignacio." He bowed politely. "When I become a man, I will learn to guide the starbirds and ride the iron spiders over the rocks of the Moon."

"*Ale, muchachito. ¡Qué tontería!*" Don Ignacio raised his scrawny shoulders and spat the brown juice of tobacco into the dusty street. "*No es posible*."

The Moon had no room for *los peones pobres*. The *vaqueros* of space were men of courage and learning, chosen for *machismo*. Don Ignacio himself had been allowed to touch the Moon spiders only when he searched for insects in the computers that were their brains. Carlos tried to boast no more, but he saw that he must master the skills of those fortunate *vaqueros gringos* and become a man of *machismo*.

He worked hard at his lessons in the village school, even harder when Don Ignacio came home again to speak of a new and swifter starbird that could vanish with a lightning flash and alight in an instant somewhere far off among the stars. He told of the great Mission Starseed, which was to build a hundred such phenomenal machines. They would carry colonists farther than telescopes could see, to inhabit new worlds too strange to he imagined.

Kneeling with his mother at mass, Carlos prayed that the saints might aid his escape from the dust and mud and want of Cuerno del Oro, to explore those miraculous lands among the stars. Mission Starseed became to him a holy thing, and he was saddened when Don Ignacio told of men who condemned it.

"*¡Locos!*" The Don drowned a fly. "Fools who name themselves Fairshare and create difficulties for the Mission. They wish to preserve the stars for the people of the stars."

Truly, did people inhabit the stars? He had to herd his father's goats, and when he lay with them, shivering through dark winter nights, he used to watch the stars and wonder about those dwellers in the sky. Would they be angels? Or devils, waiting to capture invaders for the flames of hell? Troubled, he asked Father Francisco.

The father smiled and advised him to think more of his catechism and less of riddles that had no answer. When he asked his mother, she begged him to forget the birds of space and all such devices of Satan. She feared that his dreams of them had become a hazard to his soul. Born a simple *campesino*, he must content himself to die a simple *campesino*.

His father was gone by then, wading the river to find employment in *el norte*. Preparing to follow when he had grown to fit his name, Carlos was the best student in his classes at the village school. When money began to come back from his father, his mother promised that it could pay for his studies at the university in Chihuahua.

But the money stopped.

"*¡Qué lástima!*" his mother moaned, praying for news that never came. "*¡Qué lástima!*"

When Don Ignacio returned for the next *fiesta*, he spat at an ant and observed that men too hungry for money sometimes involved themselves unwisely in the hazardous traffic forbidden by *gringo* law. A warning Father Francisco advised Carlos to heed.

His mother wept and took to her bed.

Suffering from a malady of the heart the *curandera* could never heal, she did not walk again. For all her prayers and tears, the saints never brought his father back, and he stayed to care for her. Yet, even through the years he spent toiling among the rocks to grow the *maíz* and *frijoles* that kept them alive, he searched for Don Ignacio at every *fiesta* to ask for news of those remarkable starbirds, now flashing out of their nesting pits in the launch complex, so the Don said, two or three every year.

Pájaros maravillosos, birds of wonder, they were said to lift the chosen few away from the sins of Earth to live forever on those new and more abundant lands among the infinities of stars. Each departure made a sound louder than thunder and a flash bright enough to blind any who watched with open eyes.

What was known of those islands of paradise?

Nada. Nothing. Don Ignacio shook his lean-boned head. No ships returned with men who had seen them. Yet still the clever *evangelistas* of Mission Starseed found more dollars to build another ship and more hopeful dreamers to ride it away. And Carlos, plodding back to toil on his stony hill, always longed to be among them.

He sat late by his kerosene lantern, studying books of science and space. Don Ignacio let him play with an old computer which the *vaqueros* of space had discarded because it was too slow for those new starbirds, and gave it to him when a bug disabled it. When he read its documents and learned to defeat the bug, the computer became his teacher and his friend. Its memory files were filled with more than he could learn, and it spoke a language that he loved for its purity and beauty. A simple language of words that were only one and zero, yet it was a tongue of truth, allowing neither doubt nor duplicity.

One spring Don Ignacio came home to open a shop for the sale and repair of small computers. Carlos worked there at first for no pay, learning all he could of the computer arts that the Don said might be useful on the starbirds if he ever found himself allowed to touch them.

When his mother's time had come, he lit candles for her in the church. She blessed him before the saints received her, and told him where to find the American dollars his father had brought, dollars which she had buried in a glass jar under the floor because she was afraid to spend them.

Trusting the saints, he left the *pueblito* and went north to seek the stars. *El norte* had no welcome for him. New electronic devices punished those who tried to wade the river, and the guards on the bridge turned him back.

Half his dollars went to a Juárez *abogado* for a security card and a driver's license and a labor permit. He crossed the bridge with these and walked the highway to Las Cruces. Beyond the mountains, a contractor from El Paso picked him up and carried him on to a tall fence of woven steel which was hung with yellow signs of danger. The wide arch above the gate was lettered.

WE SEE THE STARS

Clumps of dead black stubble littered the desert beyond, which the Spanish explorers had named *Jornado del Muerto*, "the Journey of Death." The brush had been killed, the contractor said, by takeoff flashes. When Car-

los asked about the starbirds, the contractor pointed to a thin silver bullet-shaped aimed into the dusty sky a dozen kilometers farther on.

"Number Ninety-Nine," he said. "Taking off tomorrow."

He had no badge to show the guard at the gate, and the contractor left him with a little group of people standing outside along the road under a drooping Fair-share banner. Most of them young, they all looked as road-worn as he was, sunburnt and grimed with sweat-caked dust. They carried battered signs: *ALIEN RIGHTS! SAVE THE STARS! EARTH'S ENOUGH!*

A van from a wrecking yard followed the contractor through the gate, and then a taxi with a woman and two small children in the back seat. He saw her from the edge of the road when the taxi stopped. *Una rubia*, young and very fair, with a beauty that took his breath. While he smiled at the little girl, she never looked toward him.

Wondering who she was, he envied those fortunate enough to know her, those of money and learning and power. Don Ignacio had spoken of them, builders and masters of the birds of space, sometimes kind but seldom really friends. Father Francisco had warned him of the temptations that must have trapped his father. The *rubia's* world, he knew, was not for him, but his eyes followed the cab through the gate.

When the road was empty again, the Fairshare people dropped their signs and invited him to the ragged tents where they camped. They shared their lunch of melting candy bars and stale fast foods and spoke of their long war to stop or delay the Starseed flights. He thanked them for the food and told them he didn't understand. Why shouldn't the starbirds fly?

"Look back, my friend." The speaker scowled through a dirty straggle of beard. "Look back at the explorers of our own Earth. Remember what we've done to forests and rivers and native cultures. Even the air. We've ruined and wasted and polluted everything. What do you think gives us any right to foul the stars?"

Carlos didn't try to argue. He simply said that he had come to ride into the sky and visit the stars for himself.

"You're a little late for that." Laughing at him, a sun-blistered girl turned to gesture toward that far silver tower. "The Mission's finished. We've killed all the talk of another hundred ships. Ninety-Nine will be the last. Taking off tonight."

He felt sick.

Es posible? Don Ignacio had taught him English, but still he thought in Spanish. "Could one get aboard?"

"Stow away?"

"Is that possible?"

She laughed again, but a man in blue coveralls turned to study him.

"Why not?" Eyes narrowed, the man looked at the girl. "With guts enough and luck enough, he might try. If he has a little money."

He could pray for *machismo* and *la suerte*. He emptied his pockets to show the dollars he had left. The man counted them, nodded for the girl to follow him out of the tent, and came back to say that perhaps his dollars would do.

"I've been spying." He glanced toward the gate and dropped his voice. "Digging for ways to cripple them. I worked at the Hundred site till they laid me off. Unloaded trucks for Ninety-Nine. Pushed dollies aboard. That's all done. If you want my hudge, we can strike a deal."

He wanted the badge. The girl wanted his dollars. Generous, the man gave him the blue coveralls as well as the badge, and made a rough map of the ship that showed a place where perhaps he could hide.

"If you have to talk, say you're on the clean-up crew," the man told him. "They wear the coveralls. The foreman's named O'Hara. Better duck him. Get under cover as soon as you can. Wait out the countdown. When it ends, you ought to be somewhere in zero G. If you're lucky."

"We'll get you on a salvage truck." The girl made a face at the ship. "But if you're really lucky, they'll find you and throw you off the ship before it ever flashes off."

2

The cab stopped at the foot of the passenger ramp beneath the ship. She slid out, a trim quick woman in a green Mission jumpsuit, and turned to help the little girl, who held a huge panda doll hugged close against her. The boy was already out.

"Dr. Virili?" The guard read her badge and smiled with approval. "You're coming with us?"

"Rima Virili. Chief of the bio service team."

With a smile of silent approval for her, he looked at his monitor and turned to the children. "Kipler Virili?"

"Kip," the boy said. "Just Kip."

"Day Virili?"

"And Me Me." The girl held up the panda. "Don't forget Me Me."

Frowning at the doll, the guard turned to Rima.

"I'm sorry, dear." She bent to hug Day and the panda.

"I told you the ship won't have room for Me Me."

"But it's so big—"

Day choked up and squeezed the doll tighter. The driver was lifting three small bags out of the cab. The guard set them on his scales.

"Sorry, hon." He tried to warm his voice. "I know the ship looks big, but we have to load another ninety people. The limit on personal effects is only five kilos. Your bag's already four point nine. That means your friend will have to wait."

She looked up at her mother, blinking hard. Rima gulped and said nothing.

"Please, sir." She kissed the panda's nose and handed it back to the driver. "Please, won't you take care of Me Me? Till we get back?"

"Don't you know—?" The driver caught himself and set the doll beside him in the cab. "Sure, sis. I have a little girl named Velda. She'll take good care of Me Me."

The guard set the bags on a conveyor. Rima wiped her nose and paid the driver. Catching the children's hands, she led them up the ramp and stopped at the edge of the concrete pad, turning with them to gaze out across the flash-blackened landscape.

"Look around us," she urged them. "All around!"

"Why?" Kip muttered. "It's all so black and ugly."

"The burnt ground here, maybe, but not the hills. Look how white and bright they are, under the new snow! The sky so blue and clean! Our own good Earth! Take a long look. I want you to remember."

Kip shrugged. Day stood waving after the departing cab. Rima was turning to lead them aboard when Captain Alt came off the ship. A seasoned veteran of space, graying at the temples but still hard and straight in his Mission green-and-gold, Alt had returned from Farside Moon Base to take this last command.

"Rima!" He hugged her and held her away from him to search her face. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I do want you with us, but the children—" He looked down at them and sharply back at her. "You're really sure?"

"It's cost a lot of sleep." She made a tired grimace. "But you know my situation. The Mission job gone. The kids to care for. It looks like our best chance. I always longed to go, and I talked to Kip about it. He calls it a great adventure."

Alt nodded. "The greatest." He caught her hand for a moment and then went on down the ramp to a temporary platform set up for the waiting media.

"Fairshare, sir." The first question was shouted from the back row. "What do you think of them?"

"I've met them." He tipped his head toward the distant gate. "They're sincere. The difference is assumption and philosophy. They imagine that the galaxies are full of Earthlike planets inhabited by innocent primitives we might destroy the way Cortes and Pizarro wiped out the Aztecs and the Incas."

"We disagree. We're not *conquistadores*. We are pledged to respect the rights of any life we find. Frankly, however, we have found no evidence of the friendly universe they assume. We're launching a hundred wavecraft instead of only three because we'll be lucky if three or four survive."

"Primitive life-forms are probably common. Many, I suspect, we wouldn't recognize as life at all. All the evidence, however, says that intelligence is rare. Ours may be unique. We can be pretty sure nobody else has developed wavecraft technology, or they'd have already been here. Perhaps to save us from ourselves. If we find a universe empty of sentience, it's surely ours to claim."

"Captain?" A lanky man in the front row raised a hesitant voice. "A more personal question, if you don't mind. If the odds are so bad, what brings you to the Mission?"

"The stakes." His voice quickened. "Think of our goal. Escape! Before wavecraft, we were prisoners here, doomed to share the fate of our little planet and finally perish with it. The Mission exists to scatter our seed across the universe, every ship another pod. When you look at that goal—the ultimate survival of our kind—odds hardly matter."

The reporter persisted. "What about you? Have you no regrets? For your family? For all the friends you must be leaving? For the world you'll never see again?"

"It hurts." Alt nodded, with a lingering glance at the

snow-dusted mountains beyond the flash-burnt plain. "But I'm ready. I've told my friends good-bye. My wife's gone. We had no children. My estate has helped fund this final flight."

"And look at Ninety-Nine!"

His face lit with a sudden smile as he turned to gesture at the wavecraft, a thin silver projectile poised over the launch pit behind him.

"My Farside tour was over. I'd planned to travel, maybe write a book about lunar exploration, play a bit of golf. Nothing I really cared about. This command is a new life, just begun."

"Jane Blake, Global Vues." Two rows back, a stocky rust-roan woman slung a holocam to her shoulder and came to her feet, announcing herself in a bullfrog voice. "You've been launching these so-called seed ships for nearly twenty years. They've cost a lot of money and carried a lot of good people off to I don't know what. They never come back. Now you tell us that most of them were probably lost. Your Mission Starseed looks to me, to a lot of us, like a very crazy game. Can you explain the risks? And the rules? In words that we can understand?"

"I can try." Alt grinned and paused for a moment to find the words. "Though we really have no way to know the risks. And we don't make the rules. They come out of physics. Relativity. Chaos theory. Quantum science."

She swung her holocam to scan the shimmering hull, and he waited for the lens to return.

"Taking off, the ships flash and vanish because they have become virtual waves, moving at the speed of light—"

"What's a virtual wave?"

"I'll try to explain that"—he shrugged and grinned again—"though the science gets abstract. Briefly, quantum mechanics gives every particle certain aspects of a wave. Taking off, the ship may be regarded as a virtual quantum particle converted into a virtual quantum wave. As a wave packet, it has no definable parameters. Becoming a virtual particle again at the point of destination, it recovers the aspects of momentum and location."

"If you get that."

"I don't." She swung her holocam to sweep the faces around her, most of them frowning. "Who does?"

"The paradoxes can seem confusing." He nodded sympathetically. "We prove the theory, however, with every takeoff. And it's the relativity paradox that makes wave flight feasible. Time slows as speed increases. It stops at the velocity of light. A flight may last a thousand years, as we on Earth perceive the time. Perhaps a million. Only an instant, however, on the ship itself."

"How do you know?" her voice sharpened. "If they don't come back?"

"They can't return." His grin turned quizzical. "Because the reconversion happens somewhere in the future. Could be a billion years from now. Time can't be reversed."

"Okay." She shrugged. "But that suggests another question. If time stands still on the ship, how do you steer it?"

"We don't. Can't even stop it. The waveform moves

on until it encounters a gravity field strong enough to reverse the launch conversion."

"A planet?"

"More likely a star. Nothing else has the concentrated mass. Of course," he added, "we do have auxiliary nuclear rockets. Once out of the quantum mode, we can move under rocket thrust within the star system. With luck, we can reach some world where we can land and live."

"Suppose you don't hit a star?" Eyes narrowed, she lowered the holocam. "Or anything big enough?"

"That probably happens. Often. I imagine. One reason we're launching a hundred ships."

"What becomes of those that don't get stopped?"

"Nothing nice." He made a wry face. "Ultimately, I suppose, the interference of cosmic dust and debris would degrade the wave shape. Scatter it, finally into gamma radiation."

"You're welcome to your flight." Lips tight, she shook her head. "I'll stay home."

She raised her lens to catch his profile, tilted again into the sun-glare off the ship. A jet had come down on the nearby airstrip, and now a jeep came roaring to the ramp in a cloud of yellow dust, horn howling. Her holocam swung to pick up Mission Director Tony Stecker as he tumbled out of it and came striding to the platform, another Mission man trotting behind him. Alt turned to greet him.

Younger than the captain, Stecker made a dapper figure in stylish crimson mods, his golden hair waved and long. More rumpled than modish, with his black beret and a straggle of iron-gray beard, the other man prowled around the edge of the group till he found a vacant chair. Sliding into it, he sat watching Stecker with a sardonic grin.

Stecker sprang to the platform, ignoring Alt's extended hand, he stepped forward and posed like a model for the lenses before he turned to the lecture. With a gesture for silence, he let his well-practiced voice float out into the flash-blackened desert.

"Fellow citizens of the universe—" He stroked a gold-nailed finger to reprove a grinning reporter. "That's who we are, we in the Mission. More than just Americans or Asians, Latins or Russians, we have become the champions of our species, striving against ultimate extinction."

He paused for effect, and struggled in comic dismay when Captain Alt stumbled off the steps in his retreat from the platform. With a murmur of assumed regret, he turned to lift his voice again, now above the rumble of a passing truck.

"Here on the launch site, we kneel at the altar of our grand hope to sow the human seed across the planets of other suns, perhaps in other galaxies. If we succeed, our race may live forever. Our sacrifice has been enormous, in resources already depleted in herculean effort, in precious human lives. In twenty years of worship, we have offered almost a hundred of these splendid wavecraft and ten thousand daring volunteers."

"If we fail—"

His words were drowned by the roar of trucks lumbering off the site, loaded with salvaged steel from dismantled

cranes and gantries. With a shrug of exasperation, he stood waiting for them to pass.

"Alt just told us that," Jane Blake murmured to the man beside her. "In plainer words."

Perhaps Stecker heard her. Flushing, he concluded the briefing and climbed the ramp to inspect Ninety-Nine. The jet waited for him on the airstrip. The driver sat sweating in the jeep, but Director Stecker never came off the ship.

It was Captain Alt who finally emerged, tight-lipped and looking dazed. His shaking hand clutched a crumpled envelope. Without another word to anybody else, he had the driver take him to the jet.

The media departed. Security closed the gates, cleared the area, and broadcast warnings of the takeoff flash. The Fairshare protesters piled their tents and sleeping bags into their ancient vans and drove away. Launch crews reported to their work stations in the underground bunkers. Sirens howled, diesels droned, and the ship sank smoothly into the launch pit.

An hour after midnight, signal rockets boomed and blazed against the desert stars. Police stopped traffic for two hundred miles around, warning drivers to cover their eyes. The takeoff flash lit the sky over half the state. The sonic boom broke windows as far away as Juárez. Ninety-Nine left the pit, a sudden blinding beam of virtual radiation.

Alt returned to Mission headquarters at Las Cruces. That crumpled envelope contained a notarized letter from Stecker, naming Alt to replace him as acting director of Mission Starseed. Stecker himself was resigning from that position to take command of Ninety-Nine, "in the best interest of the Mission."

Or rather, as Alt discovered, in the interest of Stecker himself. At Mission headquarters, he found empty files, shredded records, unpaid bills, loans overdue. Investigation revealed that Stecker had grossly mismanaged the Mission, looted it, and gone aboard Ninety-Nine in flight from the consequences. Indictments were returned, but no papers ever served.

Left bankrupt, the Mission collapsed. Salvage crews broke up the unfinished skeleton of One Hundred and hauled its metal off the site. When the spring rains came, wildflowers bloomed across the Jornada del Muerto, wherever the takeoff radiation had left seed or roots alive.

3

Aboard Ninety-Nine, they found themselves in a room shaped like a generous slice of pie.

"Welcome aboard, Dr. Virgil." At the security desk, a tall black woman in Mission gold-and-green stood up to open their bags and take Kip's Game Gate.

"Why?" Kip protested. "It's in my mass allowance. And it's mine."

"But on the prohibited list." She turned, explaining to Rima. "Electric devices are possible hazards. They could create anomalous eddies in the conversion field."

The woman promised to return it after the flight and told them how to find their cabin. "Be there when we take off." She spoke louder to impress the command on

Kip. "Get into your berths when the countdown begins. Secure your restraints. Watch the screen for information. You'll probably hear a loud sound at takeoff, and see a bright flash. Afterward, you should feel a sudden loss of weight."

Uneasily, Day looked up at her mother. "Are we going far?"

"Far," the officer said and nodded when Rima appealed to her. "Very far."

"I had to leave Me Me." Day's chin trembled. "Can I come back for her?"

"You won't—" The woman caught herself. "Maybe," she muttered. "You'll need these," she went on, giving each of them a black blindfold, a paper bag, and a tiny envelope.

"Earplugs," she said. "Insert them after the countdown begins. Cover your eyes. Keep the sick bags ready, just in case." She asked Kip, "Understand?"

"I won't be sick," he told her. "But I've got a question. If nobody ever came back, how do you know about the boom and the flash?"

"We don't. Not exactly." She turned again to Rima. "What we do know is what we observe at every launch. Conversion does happen. We expect something similar at reconversion, which should occur when we enter an adequate gravity field."

"What's a gravity field?"

"The pull of some massive object. Another sun, if we're lucky. We hope to be at a safe distance, with a friendly planet in rocket range."

"Lucky?" Kip blinked at her. "You don't know?"

"Not for sure. That's the thrill of it." Kip wasn't sure about the thrill. "We'll probably come out in free fall, but of course we don't know how wave flight feels. Or even if there's time to feel anything."

"I see," Kip nodded. "A risk we take."

"True." She turned to Rima. "If you like, Dr. Virili, we can ask the medics for a sedative."

"No sedative," Kip said. "Whatever happens to us, I want to be awake."

* * *

He nearly forgot the risks as they explored the ship. It was like a round tower with a fast elevator that ran up the center. The landings were small round rooms with many doors. One door on Deck G led them into Cabin G-9, which was theirs.

It was shaped like a very stingy piece of pie. Berths and seats and a little table folded out of the walls. There was a narrow bathroom across the broad end. The big holoscreen on the bathroom wall was like a window that kept moving to let them see the far white mountains and the trucks and cranes driving off the site and even the ship itself as it looked to a holocam in a bunker where the launch crews were waiting.

"Hear this!" Something chimed and a sudden loud voice boomed from nowhere. "Now hear this!"

The screen lit to show a control room banked with gray-cased consoles and walled with flickering monitors. A stern-faced man in a uniform cap looked out of the screen.

"First Officer Glengarth speaking, to report a change of command. Captain Alt has been replaced by Captain Tory Stecker, who will address you now."

He stiffened to salute and vanished from the screen. "A most regrettable event," Stecker had changed out of his crimson mod into official green-and-gold, but Kip heard no regret in his voice. "Captain Alt has been taken to a Las Cruces hospital for examination."

"Gerald wasn't sick," Rima whispered. "Not when we saw him."

"Takeoff, however, will not be delayed," Stecker's brisk voice lifted. "I've assumed command. Final pre-flight checks are now complete. We're entering takeoff mode. Wave conversion will take place as scheduled."

His image vanished.

"Gerald Alt was my father's best friend," Rima sat staring at the empty screen. "He used to stay with us when he was home from the Moon." Kip saw her face go hard. "I can't believe he's sick."

She said they should stay in the cabin, but takeoff was hours away. Kip felt bored, longing to be with his friends beyond the Game Gate, Captain Cometeer and the Legion of the Lost, fighting alien enemies on the hostile worlds of the Purple Sun. When he begged, she said he might look the ship over if he kept out of everybody's way.

He stayed in the elevator on the lower decks, where busy men were rushing, strange machines drumming, freight dollies rolling out of the service shaft, a drill whining somewhere, somebody hammering metal. The higher decks were almost silent. He looked into the galley and dining rooms, vacant now, all bright white porcelain and shining metal, no food in sight.

The gym on the deck above stank faintly of cleaning chemicals and stale sweat. It was a huge dim space where treadmills and squirrel cages and a huge spin-wheel loomed like the monsters of the worlds beyond the Gate. About to leave, he heard a crash and a jangle of falling glass, and saw a man opening a door under a red-glowing sign that said *ESCAPE*.

"*Hola*," The man had seen him. "*¿Qué tal?*"

He wondered if he should run, but the man wore blue coveralls instead of a uniform, and he seemed more anxious than angry.

"*Bien*," He decided to try his Spanish. "*¿Com' estas?*"

"My name is Carlos." The man came halfway back across the room. His voice was quick and hushed. "I conceal myself because I wish to ride the ship. I do no harm. Except to break the glass."

"I'm Kip."

"*¡Por favor!*" The man spread his hands, and Kip saw that one was dripping blood. "Please! If you will not report me."

He needed a shave. He didn't look clean. Perhaps he ought to be reported. Yet he had nice eyes, and the wounded hand needed a bandage.

"Okay," Kip decided. "The flight is probably dangerous. If you want the risk, I won't talk."

"*¡Antiguo mío!*" The man put out his hand, saw the blood, and drew it back. "If you speak to nobody, *gracias*!"

"Good luck!" Kip told him. "*¡Buena suerte!*"

With a quick look around the gym, Carlos stooped to gather up the biggest pieces of glass and stepped back through the door. The space beyond was tiny, nearly filled with tanks marked OXYGEN and a yellow-painted space suit. The door shut with a hollow *thunk*.

Wondering where Carlos came from and hoping now that nobody found him, Kip went back to the elevator. On the top deck, the door wouldn't open. Instead, an impatient man in a Mission uniform came into a monitor under a lens he hadn't seen and advised him sharply to get back where he belonged. He found Day asleep on a berth and his mother sitting beside her, watching the holoscreen with the volume turned low. She turned it all the way down to ask if he was okay.

"I guess," He hesitated. "But if you think Stecker lied about Captain Alt—" He stopped when he saw the tightness on her face.

"I don't know," Her voice dropped. "No matter how it happened, he's the captain now. We have to respect him. But we don't have to like him."

Kip wanted to talk about Carlos, but he had that promise to keep.

"I don't understand why we came." He knew the words might hurt her, but he couldn't stop wondering. "If we don't know where the ship will go, or anything except that we can't ever come back, the whole business seems—well, pretty risky."

"It is," He saw her bite her lip. "But really, Kip, the way things were, I didn't see much choice."

He waited, feeling sorry he had spoken. She turned off the holoscreen.

"Your father," She looked down to put Day and sat for a moment looking at nothing before she went on. "I've never told you much about him. Maybe I should say more, now that we're leaving Earth and all the past behind. If you want to know."

"Please." The moment was suddenly important. "You did say he went out on Seventy-Nine. I've always wondered why."

"For a long time I couldn't bear to talk about him. Or even think about him." Her voice was slow and her face looked older than she was. "I loved him, Kip. He did try to treat us well, at least almost all the time."

Day had made a little whimper in her sleep. Rama stopped to pull the sheet higher over her and then sat staring at the empty holoscreen as if she had forgotten about Kip.

"My father?"

"I'm sorry." She shrugged as if to shake her sadness off. "We were both very young. New to the Mission. Going out to plant the human seed in far-off galaxies seemed very wonderful. We planned to stay together, but I'd trained as a bio engineer and he was chief of a launch crew. For a long time we were needed here. Later, when slots did open, you were four and Day was on the way. The medics said I should wait. Your father went alone."

Still sad, she said no more till he asked. "Why?"

She reached to smooth Day's hair. "Another woman." Her face went harder for a moment, but then she shrugged and looked past him, seeing the woman in her

mind. "Holly Horn. Blonde and very bright. A quantum engineer. I'd roomed with her at Tech. We were friends. Or had been." Her lip twisted and quivered. "Of course, she told me she was sorry. Your father said he felt terrible. Maybe he really did. They left what money they had in a trust fund to help with your support. I always tried not to hate them, but—"

Her voice went sharp and stopped, but in a moment she went on more quietly.

"That's the bare bones of it. The reason we're here. The trust fund was used up. The Mission is dead. My job gone. I didn't like what I thought the future would be here on Earth. And Ninety-Nine—"

She smiled at the blank screen as if she saw something beautiful there.

"Who knows? We're on the last seed ship. Beginning the most exciting voyage I can imagine." Her voice slowed. "Maybe I wasn't quite fair to you and Day, but I hope you'll try to understand."

"It's okay, Mom." He stood up to put his arm around her. "I'm glad we came."

* * *

Still they had hours to wait. When she turned the holoscreen on again, it was repeating a program about ship safety. A woman in a white cap came on the screen to call them down for a quick meal of soya soup and sandwiches. When Kip got sleepy, his mother helped fix his berth. She woke him when the countdown began and buckled the web over him. Still half asleep, Day whispered for Me Me and crawled into the berth with her.

"Five minutes to launch," He pushed the soft plastic plugs into his ears, but still he heard the count. "Four . . . three . . . two . . . one minute . . ." His mother called to remind him about the blindfold. He put it on and lay waiting for something maybe like a lightning strike. "Thirty seconds . . . twenty . . . ten . . . five . . ." He shivered and tried to breathe. "Four . . . three . . . two . . . one . . ."

He heard a brittle *tock*, not very loud. The room was very dark when he shipped the blindfold off, but in a moment the screen lit again with a pale green glow. Day begged again for Me Me, and he felt himself floating off the berth.

4

"Brief me." Sweating, Stecker rolled his eyes at the maze of dials winking red and green all around the dome. "Ten years, you know, since I finished wave flight training and went into management. I need a quick review of takeoff and flight control procedures."

"Pre-launch procedures all complete," Ralston Gleggth settled into the seat beside him. "No flight control possible. Nothing more to do, sir. Not till we're out of quantum mode."

"You mean we just lie here?"

"Lie there," Gleggth swallowed his impatience. "Use your earplugs. Cover your eyes. Wait through the countdown."

"About the risk." A hint of panic quivered in Stecker's tone. "What are our odds?"

"Who knows?"

"All this uncertainty—" Stecker caught himself and muttered querulously, "Not that I'm chicken."

You're a coward, thought Glengarth. Worse than a coward, a thief on the run.

After the scene when he came aboard, Glengarth had to believe the Fairshare rumors. Tory Stecker was a pirate. He'd robbed the Mission. Stolen the ship. Stolen the life of Gerald Alt. Glengarth's friend for nearly thirty years.

Memories of those years ached in him now. He had been Alt's pilot on *Moon Magellan*. Driver of the first Moon Ranger. Surveyor of the FarSide site till the Mission called him home to become a quantum engineer. On Alt's vacations since, they'd got together for camping trips so long as they could find unspoiled wilderness left.

"Here's to the Moon!" Alt used to say, lifting his glass when they saw it rising. "Because of how it teaches you to love the hills and skies and seas of Earth as it used to be. The Mission will be lucky if you ever find its equal."

"We can hope," Glengarth used to answer.

Ninety-Nine had been their final chance. Together again when Alt brought him aboard as first officer, they had dreamed again of the virgin world they might have found in some unknown galaxy, an instant and a billion long light-years from Earth.

But for Stecker's endless chicanery.

Stecker and Jake Hinch. Robber barons, Fairshare had called them, looting the world with the scam of the century. Fighting back, Stecker ridiculed their campaigns to save the stars for the little green men and ordered them kept off the complex.

Alt had refused to believe, but the charges had to be true. Unpaid workers had left the site to picket Mission headquarters. Wrecking crews were already arriving to break up the unfinished skeleton of what should have been the final ship. Now, the Mission murdered. Stecker had come aboard to escape arrest.

* * *

"What can I expect?" Stecker nagged again. "After the countdown ends. What then?"

"Then?" Unattended mockery edged Glengarth's answer. "We'll take a look around us. Try to see where we are. Guess, if we can, how far we've left our good Earth behind. Go into rocket mode, if we do find anywhere we want to go within rocket range."

A computer chimed. Glengarth called ship security to begin the oral count. Muttering something he didn't try to hear. Stecker adjusted the blindfold and fell silent. The moment came. Glengarth's breath stopped. His own eyes covered, headphones and safety goggles on, he waited.

And waited.

A brittle crack, like a dry twig snapping. Had it happened? No light had flashed through the goggles. Had the takeoff gone wrong? Were they still in the pit?

He realized that his weight was gone.

"Where?" Stecker's yelp stabbed through his headphones. "Where are we?"

Glengarth had tried to imagine what this moment would be like. Instant extinction? Or their first glimpse of that pristine planet just ahead, lush green continents and

clean seas beckoning? It hadn't been extinction. He pushed the heavy goggles off.

No actual windows broke the armored hull, but the curved holoscreens created the illusion of a crystal dome. Dead black now, it told him nothing at all. He had to gulp at a moment of nausea. Yet the ship seemed intact. They were at least alive, free to search.

When he looked again, his eyes had begun to adjust. Stars burned through the blackness. A scattered few at first, soon lost in fields of diamond frost and clouds of glowing gas and swarms of steady suns. He touched the keys to sweep them across the dome as if the ship were turning.

Orion? Blazing Betelgeuse, the jeweled belt, the hazy fire of the Great Nebula? Or was this the Hunter's accidental twin hung somewhere across the universe? Before he could be sure, another object rose. Something dimensionless and white, vastly brighter than ruby Betelgeuse, it dimmed everything around it. He stopped it overhead.

"What the devil?"

He heard Jake Hinch's hoarse yell from the elevator. Hinch was the Mission auditor, Stecker's fellow fugitive. Outlined against the elevator lights, he was a withered human rat, long-nosed and long-chinned, bearded head shrewdly tilted beneath the black beret. Not worth hating, Glengarth thought, yet totally contemptible.

"Where the devil?" he was demanding. "Where've we got to?"

Glengarth had known him since they met in Mission training and despised him for the lies he told to get there. Despised him for his bald attempts to cheat on the tests he couldn't pass. Despised him utterly for his arrogance with Mission funds since Stecker had made him auditor.

"What the hell stopped us here?"

As a Mission agent begging the world for the funds he used to squander on his women and himself, Stecker had cultivated an easy-seeming if sometimes oily charm. Hinch, who called himself the hatchet man, had never needed charm, though Stecker had made him mend his language. Glancing now to a handhold at the elevator door, he glared around the dome with the wary hostility of some frightened predator.

"What next?" he yelled again. "What now?"

"Take a look," Glengarth shrugged, with a small tight grin. "What do you see?"

"You say it took a star to stop us?" Clutching with one hand, Hinch leaned to point at that brilliant object.

"That's the star?"

"Probably not," Glengarth shrugged again. "We've had no time for observation, but it looks too far off for its gravity to matter."

"A giant star?" Weakly, Hinch mopped at his sweat-bright face. "Wouldn't a giant be massive enough?"

"Of course, but I take that for a spectral type G2. A twin of our own sun."

"So what?" Hinch shuffled away from the elevator, sharp black eyes stabbing at the screens, at Stecker, at him. His words were a shrill demand. "I want to know."

Glengarth took a moment to control his temper. "Evidently we did enter the gravity well of something mas-

sive enough to get us out of quantum mode, but I don't see it."

"A black hole?" Stecker cringed from the stars. "Do you think . . ." His frightened whisper died.

"Possibly," Glengarth nodded. "If that's the case, we'll never see it. Our only clue would be its effect on our motion. Something that would be difficult or maybe impossible to measure, since we have no reference points."

"Then get us out of danger!" Trembling, Stecker seized Glengarth's arm. "Move!"

With more force than he intended, Glengarth twisted free. "Sir, how would you do that?"

"Idiot!" Hinch shrieked. "Shoot us out. The way you shot us here."

"Get at it!" Stecker rasped. "Now!"

"No way, sir."

"No way?" Hinch echoed. "Why the hell no way?"

"Surely, Mr. Glengarth," Stecker's tone was smoother. "You're said to be a quantum engineer. Get us back into quantum mode."

"Sir, if you understood—"

"Incompetent jerk!" Hinch shook a scrawny fist.

"Damn your excuses!"

"Cool it, Jake," Stecker pulled him back. "Listen, Mr. Glengarth, I respect your spacemanship, and I know we can't afford to quarrel. But the ship's loaded with emergency survival equipment. You've got teams of expert technicians. Get us back into quantum wave propulsion or tell me why not."

"If you really don't know, here's why," Bleaks. Glengarth grinned. "Remember the takeoff, how we sat waiting in the pit till the bunker crew fired us out. Very much like a bullet out of a gun. We didn't bring the gun, and the laws of motion still apply."

"Huh?" Stecker's jaw sagged.

"Remember Newton's laws. Action equals reaction. We need an external facility embedded in some object massive enough to absorb the launch reaction. A planet or at least a large asteroid. Something I don't see."

"If we can't get out—" Stecker gulped. "What then?"

"Hard to say," Glengarth bent to scan the green-winking consoles. "Impossible to plan anything until we can determine where we are."

"When—" Stecker mopped his face and peered into the starlit darkness. "When will that be?"

"We want action," Jake Hinch growled. "Action now!"

"Listen, Mr. Hinch," Glengarth looked up for an instant, speaking bluntly. "We're competent. We know space navigation. We have trained astronomers aboard, and expert computer software. Give us time and we'll do what we can."

"If a black hole stopped us—" Shriek with panic, Hinch grabbed Stecker's shoulder. "It will grab us. Suck us down. Drag us out of space."

"But maybe," Glengarth said. "It's not a black hole."

"What's the difference?" Teeth long and yellow, Hinch snarled through the ragged beard like a hungry wolf.

"Anything else, and we're left to drift in this hellish dark till the supplies are all eaten up and we're prowling the ship for human game."

"Please!" Glengarth spread his hands. "Gentlemen, please!" Gentlemen, he thought, wasn't quite the word.

"Jake, you'd better get out," Stecker waved Hinch into the elevator. "You're no pilot. I hope Mr. Glengarth can fly us out. Better let him try."

5

"Fun!" Day sailed off her berth. "Real fun!"

She stopped herself against the ceiling and floated slowly back.

"Careful, dear," Rima caught her ankle and pulled her down. "Till you're more used to it."

Kip felt enough weight come back so that he didn't need the handholds. They sat watching the holoscreen. It stayed empty for a long time, but at last the speaker chimed. First Officer Glengarth was on the screen.

"Ship status." His voice was hoarse, and Kip thought he looked unhappy. "We have emerged from wave propulsion with no reported damage. We are now in rocket mode, moving at point zero four G while we survey our new surroundings. Further information will follow when possible. That is all."

His image flickered out.

"That's all?" Kip looked at his mother. "What about the star that stopped us? And the new planet where we can land?"

"Try not to fret," she urged him. "Mr. Glengarth will tell us more when he can." She sighed and spoke again, more softly. "They were old friends, Rals Glengarth and Captain Alt. Friends of my father, too. The three of them loved to be together. I'm sure Mr. Glengarth will keep us safe."

He wondered how sure she really was.

They waited. Nothing happened. Day asked when they could go back for Me Me. Kip wanted his Game Gate. Finally the woman with the white cap called them down for breakfast in the dining room. It was slabs of something that the man at the counter called starchow on novakelp toast, with synkafé or soya milk.

Day pushed her tray back and begged again for Me Me. "It's not bad," Kip ate his toast and milk. "Not really bad."

"Good for us," Rima insisted. "Everything we need. But it had to be concentrated, so we could bring enough to last till we can plant our own crops."

When, Kip wondered, would that be?

Carlos was in the line of people waiting when they left the room. Now he wore yellow coveralls. The hurt hand was bandaged. A security man stood close behind him. Yet he smiled at Kip and then at Rima, and called, "*Qué tal, amigos?*"

"Who's that?" Rima asked when they had gone on. "How could he know you?"

"Carlos," Kip told her. "A stowaway." He told her how he had found Carlos in the gym.

"You never reported him?"

"He wasn't hurting anybody. All he wanted was to come on the ship. He'd cut his hand on some glass, and he was afraid. I felt sorry for him. And he has nice eyes."

"Nice eyes!" Her voice sharpened. "He could have hurt you. He could have been a Fairshare agent, aboard to sabotage the ship. You should have told the officers and told me."

"I promised not to tell."

"Kip!" she scolded. "You must learn to be careful with strangers."

He said nothing else, yet he felt glad Carlos was with them on the ship.

* * *

Back in the cabin, they waited again for that further information. It never came. Missing his friends beyond the Gate, Kip thought perhaps ship security would return the game now. Rima let him go down to ask for it. Gone two hours, he finally brought it back.

"I had a good visit with Carlos," he told her. "I like him."

"That stowaway?" She frowned.

"He's okay," he said, trying to persuade her. "Still a prisoner, not locked up. In spite of his hurt hand, he's working in the supply room. My Game Gate was dead when the security officer found it for me. He fixed it."

"Fixed it? How?"

"He knows about computers. He said the wave conversion had caused a static surge that garbled the access command. Now it works fine. And he asked about you."

"Me?"

"He was standing with those Fairshare people we saw outside the site. He saw you in the cab. When I told him you were my mother, he said I was very lucky."

"Kip, please!" She looked annoyed. "He's a criminal!"

"Not really, Mom. Security's just holding him till Captain Stecker can decide about him. Really, he's okay. I think you'd like him."

"A Mexican stowaway? What makes you think that?"

Kip was glad when the speaker chimed.

Glengarth came on the screen, smiling bleakly.

"Status update." The stubble on his face had grown darker, and he forgot to hold his smile. "Thanks to the astro team, we've discovered the object that terminated our wave flight."

His image vanished, and a field of stars filled the screen. Against them was a shadow, slowly swelling. A circular blot, it looked utterly black at first, but dull red pockmarks appeared as it grew larger, and finally a ragged, narrow crack the color of fire.

"The object," Glengarth's rusty voice went on, "is a black dwarf star. If you wonder what a black dwarf is, a star is born when gravity collapses a cloud of gas and dust. If it's big enough, the heat produced by the collapse sets off the nuclear reaction—the fusion of hydrogen into helium—that makes stars shine."

"A dwarf like this was too small to start that reaction. It was hot at first, from the collapse and the fission of unstable elements. But the surface has cooled. You can see scattered eruptions glowing through the crust, but it radiates so little heat that we found it difficult to detect. It may have planets. We're searching now, but they'll be even harder to find."

The black star vanished, but his image came back to say that further updates would follow.

"Suppose they find a planet," Kip looked at his mother. "That dead star can't warm it. What good will it be?"

"Wait." She shrugged, looking as tired as Glengarth. "Let's wait and see."

They waited.

She wanted to hear no more about Carlos Mondragon, but Kip asked for him at the security office when she let him go down to join a low-G training class.

"The Mex stowaway?" The black woman shrugged. "Gone."

He asked where.

"The computer lab," she said. "He knows computers. That power surge at takeoff played tricks on computers all over the ship. It left a bug in ours, here in supply. He knew what to do. When the astro team heard about that, they took him away."

His mother would surely like Carlos, Kip thought, if she ever got to know him.

* * *

Day was asleep when he got back from the class. When she woke still wanting Me Me, Rima took her down to the rec room. Kip went back through the Gate to rejoin the Legion of the Lost in a daring raid to rescue a captured comrade from the evil queen of the diamond planet.

Rima and Day came back, and they watched the screen again. It was still blank when the dining room manager called them down for another meal of the concentrates he had to say he liked. Two men joined them at the table and lifted their cups of synkafe to greet his mother.

She introduced them. Andy Andersen, a bald, pink-skinned giant, was head of the landing team. Tony Cruzet, the Mission astronomer, was a tiny, owl-limbed man with thick-lensed glasses. Their eyes were haggard, and they sat in moody silence till Kip and Day went to stand in line for soyasweet snowfoam.

"Bitch of a thing," Cruzet muttered to Rima then. "Stecker's drunk or in a total funk or likely both. Locked up in his cabin with empty bottles and dirty dishes scattered everywhere. Hinch finally looked out when I knocked. Asked if I knew a willing woman."

He made a dismal shrug.

"A tough time for Rals Glengarth," Andersen scowled, shaking vitasweet into his synkafe. "Sixty hours in the dome with no sleep except what he's got dozing in his seat. Doing what he can to keep a lid on panic while he looks for anywhere to go."

"A landing site?" Rima asked. "A planet?"

"We've all been on the search team, but I don't know—"

Stirring his synkafe, Andersen splashed it on the table and mopped at the spill and forgot to go on.

"So?" she prompted him. "The outlook?"

"Not good," he muttered. "If you want the truth, it's a no-win game. Planets would be invisible, if the star has planets. None for sure in radar or lidar range. Rotation might have been a clue to the orbital plane where they ought to be, but the dwarf doesn't rotate. Not fast enough to tell us anything."

He shook his head and mopped again at the brown splash on the table.

"And what if we find 'em?" Cruzet blinked at her with

a look of groggy defiance. "You lead the bio team? Here to terraform some strange planet into a better Earth? If we do stumble onto some dirty snowball, close to absolute zero, what do you plan for that?"

Day and Kip came back with their snowfoam before she had to answer.

The message gong woke her late that night.

"Dr. Virili?" Andy Andersen called from the control dome. "A new situation. Mr. Glengarth wants all team leaders here in twenty minutes."

6

The call had awakened Kip. He agreed to stay in the cabin with Day. Rima took the elevator to the control deck and came out into blinding midnight.

"Rima!" Glengarth called warmly out of the darkness. "You know Dr. Cruzet and Dr. Andersen. This is Carlos Mondragon."

In a moment she was able to make out the little group standing in silhouette against the stars that filled the arching screens.

"Señora Virili!" She recognized the stowaway's accent. "I know your fine son. I am happy to find you here."

Kip's friendships had always baffled her, but she murmured, "Hello."

"I called all the team leaders," Glengarth turned soberly from the dimly glowing instruments. "Lt. Mason won't leave the security desk. Mr. Senn's still on his radar search. Mr. Hinch says Captain Stecker is sleeping. Not to be disturbed."

"Just as well," Andersen murmured.

"The search?" she asked. "Is there anywhere to land?"

"We were groping in the dark," Andersen's even voice was resonant and deep. She thought he would sing bass. "But we did find a planet. Tony'll tell you how."

"We deployed a reference satellite," Cruzet's precise, dry voice held no emotion she could hear. "Tracking it, we were able to detect and measure the planet's gravitation effect, the way Adams and Leverrier detected Neptune's. Thanks to Mr. Mondragon at the computer."

He turned to point at a dull red disk against the field of stars.

"A radar image. The color's false, of course. We're looking at a great ice cap. Probably white, if we had light to see it. We're moving toward it—and the dwarf beyond it—at nearly seven kilometers a second."

"Can we land?"

"Perhaps." Hesitant, Glengarth looked at Cruzet and Andersen. "That's what I called you to consider."

"It's far too cold to colonize," Andersen hunched himself and made a mock shiver. "Near absolute zero."

"Certainly no promising site for settlement," Cruzet nodded. "Though large enough. Slightly more massive than Earth. The orbit's nearly circular, only nine million kilometers out from the dwarf. It rotates in tidal lock. Same face always away from the star. The face we see." He gestured at the disk. "I think it once had seas and atmosphere. All frozen now into the ice that covers most of this hemisphere."

"The other hemisphere—would it be warmer?"

"Once, I suppose. Not today."

"We must look—"

"By whose authority?" Hinch's raucous squawk startled Rima. He had come out of the elevator and stopped close behind her, a gaunt gray ghost blinking blindly into the dimness. "Captain Stecker must be consulted."

"You said he was sleeping," Glengarth shrugged and turned back to the others. "We have to act now, because we came out of quantum mode with such a high velocity. Braking it will take a lot of fuel. I believe we can get down safe, though with too little fuel left for takeoff if we don't like the place. I wanted you to realize we'd have to stay—"

"Not so fast!" Hinch snarled. "Hold everything till the captain wakes up."

Seeming not to hear him, Glengarth gestured at Cruzet. "Before we decide, there's something else."

"Nothing I expected," Cruzet's thin dry voice reflected none of the tension that had seized the group. "The planet was certainly warmer once, from the heat of fission and gravitation. Perhaps life did exist. In any case, the dwarf stopped shining billions of years ago. Naturally, we'd assumed that the planet was dead."

"Till Andy got this."

Andersen touched the console behind him. Rima watched that dim red globe swell to fill its window in the simulated sky. A faint green dot appeared on the center of it and grew to become a wide green rectangle with neat green hexagons spaced to form an arc half around it.

"He'd been with Mark Senn on the search telescope. He can tell you—"

"What the blazing hell?" Standing close behind Rima, Hinch yelled in alarm. "What's that?"

"You tell us," Andersen shrugged and turned again to the others. "What you see is our digital record of an anomaly the radar sweep picked up. False color again, now to show elevation differences. Whatever these objects are, they stand two of three kilometers above the level of the ice. They're massive as mountains, but you see the geometric shapes. Senn thinks they have to be artificial."

Rima's breath had stopped. She heard a fan whirring faintly, and Hinch's stifled obscenity.

"A city?" Andersen paused to stare at the green-glowing enigma, and she felt his awe. "If you can imagine a city there on the ice, maybe built of ice, its buildings larger than any building could be."

"Strange," She tried to push off her dread. "But couldn't it be a natural formation? Glaciers form hummocks and crevasses—"

"You haven't heard the evidence," Glengarth was craning his neck toward those shapes in the sky. "Evidence of what, I don't know. Listen to Andy."

"I was on the light telescope while Senn ran the radar scan," Andersen spoke with a quiet deliberation, careful of facts. "Not that I could actually see the planet, but I'd got its outline from the stars it occluded. Sweeping the ice at high power, I wasn't really expecting anything at all. Not till I saw lights flashing."

She heard Hinch gasp as if from a blow.
"Only flickering, really. Off and on. And hard to see—the planet's still half a million kilometers away. When they came again, I called Tony."

"Natural lighting, I tried to imagine." Cruzet's narrow shoulders lifted as if in apology for all he couldn't explain. "But lightning doesn't happen at absolute zero. And not without an atmosphere. The colors were another riddle. Yellow flashes. Fainter greens and violets. All coming from those objects on the ice every time Sena's search beam passed, as if something took it for a signal."

"Something?" she echoed. "What?"

"Ice gods?" Andersen seemed to mock her amazement, or perhaps his own. "Ice giants? What sort of creatures would you expect to find there on the ice? Where only the stars have shone for maybe ten billion years?"

"What? What possibly..." Her whisper died. They all stared in silence at that dim green image overhead. Hinch moved abruptly, retreating toward the elevator.

"If a landing can be made, I would volunteer." The stowaway's voice was so soft she barely heard him. "I think we must know what signals to us from the ice."

"Our option," Glengarth turned to scan their faces. "To land or not to land. If we don't, our high velocity will carry us on to pass close around the dwarf. The gravity assist would sling us off into nowhere at double our velocity."

"And no second chance," Cruzet added. "Not to land here or anywhere."

"So?" She shuddered, staring into empty sky. "We'd just drift?"

"Drift?" A harsh snort from Hinch. "Drift forever? Till we have to hunt each other?"

"I hope not," Glengarth murmured. "We're surely too civilized for that."

"Think so?" Hinch glared from the elevator door. "I'm going down to wake the captain. He'll find some better answer. And he still commands the ship."

"When you wake him," Glengarth called, "let him read the Mission Covenant. A document he should have signed before he came aboard. He'll find that his status changed when we came out of quantum mode. We are now an independent democracy, governing ourselves. The ship is to land us at whatever site we may select."

Hinch stood gaping, shaking a grumpy fist. "Idiot!" he gasped. "A ship of howling idiots!"

The elevator swallowed him.

"We are civilized," Glengarth murmured when he was gone.

"And lucky," Andersen craned that dim green riddle, returning the planet's false-colored maps. "Lucky to get out of wave mode alive."

"So now?" Rima asked again. "Can we land?"

"I believe we're agreed," Glengarth nodded. "Somewhere off the ice, on the hemisphere we don't see."

"And we'll survive." Resolutely, she raised her eyes toward that dim crimson globe. "After all, we were never promised paradise."

"¡Seguro!" Carlos nodded, grinning at her through the starlight. "*Seguro que sí.*"

She couldn't help smiling at him.

"We'll find our own better answers." She spoke to the planet's image. "The ice has hydrogen. There will be soil down off the cap, or something we can turn into soil. We have skills, technology, equipment. For shelter, we can burrow—"

"¡De verdad!" Carlos grinned more widely. "Working in certainty, I saw *los topes de invierno*. The great machines that dig."

"Our plows!" Andersen spread his arms. "And a new world to seed."

Kip was awake when Rima returned to their cabin. He listened very quietly to what she said about the meeting in the dome, and asked what ice gods would he like

"Not gods, really," she told him. "Dr. Andersen was only using a figure of speech to imply that he had no idea what could be making the lights. The ice gods were only Norse myths."

"Yet something real was there to flash the lights. Something big, if their buildings are two miles tall. If they aren't gods—"

"We've no idea what they are."

"Why did they signal? To welcome us? Or warn us to keep off?"

"We've no way to know. If we land, it will be on the other side of the planet, fifteen thousand kilometers away. We'll probably never know, which means they will never matter. Better forget them and go back to sleep."

"They matter to me." Back on his berth, he lay silent will she thought he was asleep. "Mom?" His voice came suddenly. "Are you sorry, sorry we came?"

She thought she had to be honest.

"Because of you and Day," she said. "Because your future's so uncertain. I suppose I ought to be."

"Don't," he told her. "I'm glad we came. Because the ice gods are so exciting. I want to find out what they are."

Soon she heard his regular breathing, but she lay awake a long time, trying to imagine the landing. On a dead world of old ice and naked stone, under a sky where no sun had shone for a billion or ten billion years. To stay forever. To build a home for Kip and Day. To plant the human seed. Was it possible? She couldn't quite believe. Longing for some small grain of Kip's reckless confidence, she finally slept.

The children's cheerful voices woke her. Day was molding a tiny Me-Me with clay they had brought from the rec room. Kip was busy with his Game Gate.

"You'll cheer up, Mom," he called to her brightly, "when you hear about my dream. I was on a great adventure with my friends beyond the Gate. We landed on the ice cap and met the ice gods. Only like you said they weren't gods at all, but monsters with the shape of thunderclouds. They fought us with lightning and hail."

"But we beat them!" Because heat kills them. Their hailstones all melted before they could hurt us. One of them tried to strike me with lightning, and my warm breath shrank it to nothing. The hot blast of our engines drove them off the ice. So we're going to be okay on the planet."

"We're going to be the real ice gods!" ♦

Wonder Remembered

Jack Williamson

We long-time fans cherish fond recollections of the stories that made us fans. For me, they were the "science-fiction" in *Amazing Stories* for March 1927. The magazine was barely a year old then, and my copy was a free sample I had seen offered in an ad in a little farm paper called *Pathfinder*.

The feature story was T. S. Stribling's "The Green Splotches," a great adventure novelette set in the remote Andes, where his explorers encounter plant-men who spill the green blood. The cover, by Frank R. Paul, shows them taking off for Jupiter in a ship propelled by light. That was before Michael Whelan and his likes. Paul's people are wooden dummies when we look back at them now, but his spacecraft and other-world landscapes and alien beings were sheer wonder then, with a breathtaking impact on me.

That same dazzling copy also had A. Merritt's "The People of the Pit," which must have been the model for my own first story, "The Metal Man," which *Amazing* printed in December 1928—before Hugo Gernsback ever bothered to tell me he had accepted it. In the far Arctic, Merritt's hero is terrified by the giant slugs that inhabit an unknown crater. Mine is turned to strange green metal after he escapes the crystal inhabitants of an unknown crater in the mountains of Mexico.

There was more: the second installment of "The Land that Time Forgot," where Edgar Rice Burroughs carries us to a mystery-haunt island

continent teeming with the reborn monsters of the prehistoric past. And "Under the Knife," by H. G. Wells, about a patient in surgery who leaves his body to explore the universe.

Here's how I put the inspiration, or maybe I should say the obsession, the magazine gave me, in an editorial that won a prize from Gernsback's *Amazing Stories Quarterly* in 1928: "Must man pass with the Earth, or will human intelligence rule on, a new factor in the universe? The idea is stupendous. Science is the doorway to the future; scientification the golden key."

I was eighteen when that maniac devotion to the fiction first possessed me: a half-educated farm kid with no social skills, existing mostly in my own imagination. My first few years had been lived close to the stone age. When I was only six weeks old, my parents had taken me by horseback to a grass-roofed rock house on a ranch in Mexico, high in the Sierra Madre and a long day's ride beyond the end of any road. My first friends had been lion hunters and their hounds, there to kill the mountain lions that preyed on the cattle.

We moved out to escape a revolution, first to Pecos, Texas, and then, the year I was seven, by covered wagon to the isolated sandhill homestead in Eastern New Mexico where I grew up. Taught mostly at home, I had two years of grade school and four in a country high school. With everything to learn, I found wonder everywhere.

The key to it was science, which was then a noble enterprise. Scientists were the heroes of the time, building brave new worlds. Edison was inventing the electric light and the phonograph and the motion picture. Luther was inventing new plants. Henry Ford was inventing mass production and putting the nation on the move. Radio and television and the secrets of the atom were exciting promises of things soon to come.

I'd seen my first car when a neighbor bought a new Ford and cranked the engine to show off the magneto lights. I remember my first airplane and learning to start the engine by pulling the prop through when the pilot yelled "Contact!" I remember building my own one-tube radio receiver and the thrill of putting on the headphones to hear the New Year sweeping across the country. That must have been 1927, the year I discovered "scientification."

The titles of the early magazines were frank appeals to the "sense of wonder." Launching *Science Wonder Stories* when he lost *Amazing*, Hugo Gernsback needed a new name for the contents. He invented the term "science fiction." My own novelette in the second issue, "The Alien Intelligence," must have been among the first stories to carry the name. *Astounding* soon joined the pack. First called *Astounding Stories of Super-Science*, it still lives on as *Analog*. Later I had stories in *Startling* and *Marvel* and *Strange Tales* and *Weird Tales*.

By any name, they intoxicated me. A college freshman when my first story was printed, I dropped out after two years to write science fiction. In those early days, when it was still so new that you had to keep explaining what it was, the income was small and uncertain, but I did earn enough to let me keep on writing it, which was all I wanted to do.

Wonder was real enough then, and not just to science fiction fans still twelve years old. The whole temper of the world was different in a way that younger generations may find hard to imagine. I was an Army weather man, forecasting tropical weather for Marine air groups hobbling the bypassed Japanese on Bougainville and Rabaul when the Bomb fell on Hiroshima. That ended the war for me, and turned the age of wonder into the balance of terror.

Science fiction changed. Gernsback had preached progress. His string of magazines included *Science and Invention*, devoted to the faith that new and better technology could fix any problem. The Chicago World's Fair had been called The Century of Progress. Through the "golden age of science fiction" that began when John W. Campbell became editor of *Astounding*, he had been inspiring Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov and a good many of the rest of us with his optimistic vision of a splendid human future.

When I came to do my dissertation for the Ph.D. in the 1960s, it was about the criticism of the idea of progress in the great science fiction. H. G. Wells was writing back in the 1890s. In the 1930s, however, most of us could still believe, at least sometimes, in technology and all those promises of better worlds to come. There were yet no campaigns to save the whales and the owls, the redwoods and the rain forests and the darter fish, no haunting dreads of ozone depletion and global warming and nuclear doom.

Wonder is out of fashion now, its old bright illusions drowned in pessimistic cynicism. Too many of the technological miracles we used to hope for have turned to nightmares. We're jaded with too much of every-

thing, too many promises of instant solutions to problems we never knew we had, too many threats and alarms of hazards that for all we know may be merely the inventions of some special interest.

Back home from the war and the Bomb's aftermath, I felt out of step with this darkening age. New generations of brilliant new writers were publishing a different kind of fiction, where style and pessimistic social satire took the place of wonder. Looking for a more comfortable fit to different times, I quit science fiction for a newspaper job, though only for a few months. I married, and built a house. Through a freak of good fortune, I was asked to write a comic strip for the *New York Sunday News*.

The strip ran for three years. Enjoying the regular checks it paid, I went back to college and became an English professor at my hometown university. I taught science fiction. In collaboration with such able writers as Jim Gunn and Fred Pohl, I kept on writing it.

For me the wellsprings of wonder have never dried up entirely. I've always found them in the sciences. I want to know what we are and what our world is, to know our origins and our limits and our final destiny. With cool comfort from religion, I look to science for answers. The march of science has been a suspenseful mystery serial, new clues revealed day by day and week by week.

An endless adventure. Since the 1920s, I've seen astronomers push the edge of everything out beyond the Milky Way to include all the hundred billion galaxies they first called "island universes" and push our date of origin back to the hypothetical "big bang" fifteen or twenty billion years ago. I've seen the indivisible atom splintered into a hundred different particles that have all turned to quarks. I've watched biologists decoding our genetic blueprints in the double helix. All grist for science fiction.

Of course the genre has many other sources and offers more than wonder. With upwards of a thousand members in SFWA, the genre now has a thousand faces, and much of it

is better written than the stories in the old pulps that captured me. A few of my friends used to chafe at the name and fret about the walls of the "ghetto" that shut us out of the mainstream. Though these barriers never much concerned me, I believe they're finally breaking down. I see science fiction titles on the best seller lists. I've just read Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book*, which offers more than wonder. By any measure, it can stand comparison with any recent mainstream fiction I know.

After all the years, I'm still captive to the wonder of that forever fascinating frontier between the proven and the possible, where the scientists themselves are thinking like science-fictioneers as they search for theories that may push the borders of the known farther out.

Those perimeters of wonder were nearer when I began, with tempting story ideas everywhere. In my first novel, *The Birth of a New Republic*, written with Miles J. Breuer and published in 1930, we rode rockets to the moon. The Venusian jungles of "The Cosmic Express" weren't absolutely impossible when I wrote that story. We know better now, since the *Apollo*s, since *Mariner*, since the *Vikings* found a lifeless Mars, since the *Voyager* flybys made us all vicarious explorers of the outer planets and their icy moons.

Yet the ultimate answers have yet to be discovered. I hope they're never found, because I don't want the wonder of science to end. It's always giving me another idea. "The Ice Gods" is one more lease on the writing that keeps me alive.

The great current riddle of astrophysics is the nature of "the missing mass." The motions of the galaxies show that most of the mass in the universe is something we can't see. Unproven theories abound. "Brown dwarfs" are one possibility; stars born too small to shine. Astronomers looking for them have had very little luck, yet of course they should be hard to find. The black dwarf in "The Ice Gods" is such a star. The problems of survival on its cold and lightless planets will surely multiply to make a novel. ♦

The Cosmic Express

First published in the November 1930 issue of *Amazing Stories*

Jack Williamson

Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding tumbled out of the crumpled bed-clothing, a striking slender figure in purple-striped pajamas. He smiled fondly across to the other of the twin beds, where Nada, his pretty bride, lay quiet beneath light silk covers. With a groan, he stood up and began a series of fantastic bending exercises. But after a few half-hearted movements, he gave it up, and walked through an open door into a small bright room, its walls covered with book-cases and also with scientific appliances that would have been strange to the man of four or five centuries before, when the Age of Aviation was just beginning.

Yawning, Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding stood before the great open window, staring out. Below him was a wide, park-like space, green with emerald lawns, and bright with flowering plants. Two hundred yards across it rose an immense pyramidal building—an artistic structure, gleaming with white marble and bright metal, striped with the verdure of terraced roof-gardens, its slender peak rising to help support the gray, steel-ribbed glass roof above.



Illustration by Frank Kelly Freese

Beyond, the park stretched away in illimitable vistas, broken with the graceful columned buildings that held up the great glass roof.

Above the glass, over this New York of 2432 A.D., a freezing blizzard was sweeping. But small concern was that to the lightly clad man at the window, who was inhaling deeply the fragrant air from the plants below—air kept, winter and summer, exactly at 20°C.

With another yawn, Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding turned back to the room, which was bright with the rich golden light that poured in from the suspended globes of the cold ato-light that illuminated the snow-covered city. With a distasteful grimace, he seated himself before a broad, paper-littered desk, sat a few minutes leaning back, with his hands clasped behind his head. At last he straightened reluctantly, slid a small typewriter out of its drawer, and began pecking at it impatiently.

For Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding was an author. There was a whole shelf of his books on the wall, in bright jackets, red and blue and green, that brought a thrill of pleasure to the young novelist's heart when he looked up from his clattering machine.

He wrote "thrilling action romances," as his enthusiastic publishers and television directors said, "of ages past when men were men. Red-blooded heroes responding vigorously to the stirring passions of primordial life!"

He was impartial as to the source of his thrills—provided they were distant enough from modern civilization. His hero was likely to be an ape-man roaring through the jungle, with a bloody rock in one hand and a beautiful girl in the other. Or a cowboy, "hard-riding, hard-shooting," the vanishing hero of the ancient ranches. Or a man marooned with a lovely woman on a desert South Sea island. His heroes were invariably strong, fearless, resourceful fellows, who could handle a club on equal terms with a cave-man, or call science to aid them in defending a beautiful mate from the terrors of a desolate wilderness.

And a hundred million read Eric's novels, and watched the dramatization of them on the television screens. They thrilled at the simple, romantic lives his heroes led, paid him handsome royalties, and subconsciously shared his opinion that civilization had taken all the best from the life of man.

Eric had settled down to the artistic satisfaction of describing the sensuous delight of his hero in the roasted marrow-bones of a dead mammoth, when the pretty woman in the other room stirred, and presently came tripping into the study, gay and vivacious, and—as her husband of a few months most justly thought—altogether beautiful in a bright silk dressing gown.

Recklessly he slammed the machine back into its place, and resolved to forget that his next "red-blooded action thriller" was due in the publisher's office at the end of the month. He sprang up to kiss his wife, held her embraced for a long happy moment. And then they went hand in hand to the side of the room and punched a series of buttons on a panel—a simple way of ordering breakfast sent up the automatic shaft from the kitchens below.

Nada Stokes-Harding was also an author. She wrote poems—"back to nature stuff"—simple lyrics of the sea, of

sunsets, of bird songs, of bright flowers and warm winds, of thrilling communion with Nature, and growing things. Men read her poems and called her a genius. Even though the whole world had grown up into a city, the birds were extinct, there were no wild flowers, and no one had time to bother about sunsets.

"Eric, darling," she said, "isn't it terrible to be cooped up here in this little flat, away from the things we both love?"

"Yes, dear. Civilization has ruined the world. If we could only have lived a thousand years ago, when life was simple and natural, when men hunted and killed their meat, instead of drinking synthetic stuff, when men still had the joys of conflict, instead of living under glass, like hot-house flowers."

"If we could only go somewhere—"

"There isn't anywhere to go. I write about the West, Africa, South Sea islands. But they were all filled up two hundred years ago. Pleasure resorts, sanatoriums, cities, factories."

"If only we lived on Venus! I was listening to a lecture on the television, last night. The speaker said that the Planet Venus is younger than the Earth, that it has not cooled so much. It has a thick, cloudy atmosphere, and low, rainy forests. There's simple, elemental life there—like Earth had before civilization ruined it."

"Yes, Kingsley, with his new infra-red ray telescope, that penetrates the cloud layers of the planet, proved that Venus rotates in about the same period as Earth, and it must be much like Earth was a million years ago."

"Eric! I wonder if we could go there! It would be so thrilling to begin life like the characters in your stories, to get away from this hateful civilization, and live natural lives. Maybe a rocket—"

The young author's eyes were glowing. He skipped across the floor, seized Nada, kissed her ecstatically.

"Splendid! Think of hunting in the virgin forest, and bringing the game home to you! But I'm afraid there is no way—Wait! The Cosmic Express!"

"The Cosmic Express?"

"A new invention. Just perfected a few weeks ago, I understand. By Ludwig Von der Valls, the German physicist."

"I've quit bothering about science. It has ruined nature, filled the world with silly, artificial people, doing silly, artificial things."

"But this is quite remarkable, dear. A new way to travel—by ether!"

"By ether?"

"Yes. You know of course that energy and matter are interchangeable terms; both are simply etheric vibration, of different sorts."

"Of course. That's elementary." She smiled proudly. "I can give you examples, even of the change. The disintegration of the radium atom, making helium and lead and energy. And Millikan's old proof that his Cosmic Ray is generated when particles of electricity are united to form an atom."

"Fine! I thought you said you weren't a scientist." He glowed with pride. "But the method, in the new Cosmic Express, is simply to convert the matter to be carried into

power, and send it out as a radiant beam and focus the beam to convert it back into atoms at the destination."

"But the amount of energy must be terrific!"

"It is. You know short waves carry more energy than long ones. The Express Ray is an electromagnetic vibration of frequency far higher than that of even the Cosmic Ray, and correspondingly more powerful and more penetrating."

The girl frowned, running slim fingers through golden-brown hair. "But I don't see how they get any recognizable object, not even how they get the radiation turned back into matter."

"The beam is focused, just like the light that passes through a camera lens. The photographic lens, using light rays, picks up a picture and reproduces it again on the plate—just the same as the Express Ray picks up an object and sets it down on the other side of the world."

"An analogy from television might help. You know that by means of the scanning disc, the picture is transformed into mere rapid fluctuations in the brightness of a beam of light. In a parallel manner, the focal plane of the Express Ray moves slowly through the object, progressively, dissolving layers of the thickness of a single atom which are accurately reproduced at the other focus of the instrument—which might be in Venus."

"But the analogy of the lens is the better of the two. For no receiving instrument is required, as in television. The object is built up of an infinite series of plane layers at the focus of the ray, no matter where that may be. Such a thing would be impossible with radio apparatus, because even with the best beam transmission, all but a tiny fraction of the power is lost, and powers required to rebuild the atoms. Do you understand, dear?"

"Not altogether. But I should worry. Here comes breakfast. Let me butter your toast."

A bell had rung at the shaft. She ran to it and returned with a great silver tray, laden with dainty dishes which she set on a little side table. They sat down opposite each other, and ate, getting as much satisfaction from contemplation of each other's faces as from the excellent food. When they had finished, she carried the tray to the shaft, slid it in a slot, and touched a button—thus disposing of the culinary cares of the morning.

She ran back to Eric, who was once more staring distastefully at his typewriter.

"Oh, darling! I'm thrilled to death about the Cosmic Express! If we could go to Venus, to a new life on a new world, and get away from all this hateful conventional society—"

"We can go to their office—it's only five minutes. The chap that operates the machine for the company is a pal of mine. He's not supposed to take passengers except between the offices they have scattered about the world. But I know his weak point—"

Eric laughed, fumbled with a hidden spring under his desk. A small polished object, gleaming silver, slid down into his hand.

"Old friendship, *plus* this, would make him . . . like spinach."

* * *

Five minutes later Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding and his pretty wife were in street clothes, light silk tunics of loose, flowing lines—little clothing being required in the artificially warmed city. They entered an elevator and dropped thirty stories to the ground floor of the great building.

There they entered a cylindrical car, with rows of seats down the sides. Not greatly different from an ancient subway car, except that it was airtight, and was hurled by magnetic attraction and repulsion through a tube exhausted of air, at a speed that would have made an old subway rider gasp with amazement.

In five more minutes their car had whipped up to the base of another building, in the business section, where there was no room for parks between the mighty structures that held the unbroken glass roofs two hundred stories above the concrete pavement.

An elevator brought them up a hundred and fifty stories. Eric led Nada down a long, carpeted corridor to a wide glass door, which bore the words:

COSMIC EXPRESS

stenciled in gold capitals across it.

As they approached, a lean man, carrying a black bag, dashed out of an elevator shaft opposite the door, ran across the corridor, and entered. They pushed in after him.

They were in a little room, cut in two by a high brass grill. In front of it was a long bench against the wall, that reminded one of the waiting room in an old railroad depot. In the grill was a little window, with a lazy, brown-eyed youth leaning on the shelf behind it. Beyond him was a great, glittering piece of mechanism, half hidden by the brass. A little door gave access to the machine from the space before the grill.

The thin man in black, whom Eric now recognized as a prominent French heart-specialist, was dancing before the window, waving his hag frantically, raving at the sleepy boy.

"Queek! I have tell you zee truth! I have zee most urgent necessity to go queeky. A patient I have in Paree, zat zees in zee most critical condition!"

"Hold your horses just a minute, Mister. We got a client in the machine now. Russian diplomat from Moscow to Rio de Janeiro. . . . Two hundred seventy dollars and eighty cents, please. . . . Your turn next. Keep cool, you'll be there before you know it. Remember this is just an experimental service. Regular installations all over the world in a year. . . . Ready now. Come on in."

The youth took the money, pressed a button. The door sprang open in the grill, and the frantic physician leaped through it.

"Lie down on the crystal, face up," the young man ordered. "Hands at your sides, don't breathe. Ready!" He manipulated his dials and switches, and pressed another button.

"Why, hello, Eric, old man!" he cried. "That's the lady you were telling me about! Congratulations!" A bell jangled before him on the panel. "Just a minute. I've got a call." He punched the board again. Little bulbs lit and glowed for a second. The youth turned toward the half-hidden machine, spoke courteously.

"All right, madam. Walk out. Hope you found the transit pleasant."

"But my Violet! My precious Violet!" a shrill female voice came from the machine. "Sir, what have you done with my darling Violet?"

"I'm sure I don't know, madam. You lost it off your hat?"

"None of your impertinence, sir! I want my dog."

"Ah, a dog. Must have jumped off the crystal. You can have him sent on for three hundred and—"

"Young man, if any harm comes to my Violet—I'll—I'll—I'll appeal to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals!"

"Very good, madam. We appreciate your patronage."

The door flew open again. A very fat woman, puffing angrily, face highly colored, clothing shimmering with artificial gems, waddled pompously out of the door through which the frantic French doctor had so recently vanished. She rolled heavily across the room, and out into the corridor. Shrill words floated back:

"I'm going to see my lawyer! My precious Violet—"

The tall youth winked. "And now what can I do for you, Eric?"

"We want to go to Venus, if that ray of yours can put us there."

"To Venus? Impossible. My orders are to use the Express merely between the sixteen designated stations, at New York, San Francisco, Tokio, Lon—"

"See here, Charley." With a cautious glance toward the door, Eric held up the silver flask. "For old time's sake, and for this—"

The boy seemed dazed at the sight of the bright flask. Then, with a single swift motion, he snatched it out of Eric's hand, and bent to conceal it below his instrument panel.

"Sure, old boy. I'd send you to heaven for that, if you'd give me the micrometer readings to set the ray with. But I tell you, this is dangerous. I've got a sort of television attachment, for focusing the ray. I can turn that on Venus—I've been amusing myself, watching the life there, already. Terrible place. Savage. I can pick a place on high land to set you down. But I can't be responsible for what happens afterward."

"Simple, primitive life is what we're looking for. And now what do I owe you—"

"Oh, that's all right. Between friends. Provided that stuff's genuine! Walk in and lie down on the crystal block hands at your sides. Don't move."

The little door had swung open again, and Eric led Nada through. They stepped into a little cell, completely surrounded with mirrors and vast prisms and lenses and electron tubes. In the center was a slab of transparent crystal, eight feet square and two inches thick, with an intricate mass of machinery below it.

Eric helped Nada to a place on the crystal, lay down at her side.

"I think the Express Ray is focused just at the surface of the crystal, from below," he said. "It dissolves our substance, to be transmitted by the beam. It would look as if we were melting into the crystal."

"Ready," called the youth. "Think I've got it for you. Sort of a high island in the jungle. Nothing bad in sight now. But, I say—how're you coming back? I haven't got time to watch you."

"Go ahead. We aren't coming back."

"Geel! What is it? Elopement? I thought you were married already. Or is it business difficulties? The Bears did make an awful raid last night. But you better let me set you down in Hong Kong."

A bell jangled. "So long," the youth called.

Nada and Eric felt themselves enveloped in fire. Sheets of white flame seemed to lap up about them from the crystal block. Suddenly there was a sharp tingling sensation where they touched the polished surface. Then blackness, blankness.

* * *

The next thing they knew, the fires were gone from about them. They were lying in something extremely soft and fluid; and warm rain was beating in their faces. Eric sat up, found himself in a mud-puddle. Beside him was Nada, opening her eyes and struggling up, her bright garments stained with black mud.

All about rose a thick jungle, dark and gloomy—and very wet. Palm-like, the gigantic trees were, or fern-like, flinging clouds of feathery green foliage high against a somber sky of unbroken gloom.

They stood up, triumphant.

"At last!" Nada cried. "We're free! Free of that hateful old civilization! We're back to Nature!"

"Yes, on our feet now, not parasites on the machines."

"It's wonderful to have a fine, strong man like you to trust in, Eric. You're just like one of the heroes in your books!"

"You're the perfect companion, Nada. . . . But now we must be practical. We must build a fire, find weapons, set up a shelter of some kind. I guess it will be right, pretty soon. And Charley said something about savage animals he had seen in the television."

"We'll find a nice dry cave, and have a fire in front of the door. And skins of animals to sleep on. And pottery vessels to cook in. And you will find seeds and grown grain."

"But first we must find a flint-bed. We need flint for tools, and to strike sparks to make a fire with. We will probably come across a chunk of virgin copper, too—it's found native."

Presently they set off through the jungle. The mud seemed to be very abundant, and of a most sticky consistency. They sank into it ankle deep at every step, and vast masses of it clung to their feet. A mile they struggled on, without finding where a provident nature had left them even a single fragment of quartz, to say nothing of a mass of pure copper.

"A darned shame," Eric grumbled. "to come forty million miles, and meet such a reception as this!"

Nada stopped. "Eric," she said, "I'm tired. And I don't believe there's any rock here, anyway. You'll have to use wooden tools, sharpened in the fire."

"Probably you're right. The soil seemed to be of alluvial origin. Shouldn't be surprised if the native rock is some hundreds of feet underground. Your idea is better."

"You can make a fire by rubbing sticks together, can't you?"

"It can be done—easily enough, I'm sure. I've never tried it, myself. We need some dry sticks, first."

They resumed the weary march, with a good fraction of the new planet adhering to their feet. Rain was still falling from the dark heavens in a steady, warm down-pour. Dry wood seemed scarce as the proverbial hen's teeth.

"You didn't bring any matches, dear?"

"Matches? Of course not! We're going back to Nature!"

"I hope we get a fire pretty soon."

"If dry wood were gold dust, we couldn't buy a hot dog."

"Eric, that reminds me that I'm hungry."

He confessed to a few pangs of his own. They turned their attention to looking for banana trees, and coconut palms, but they did not seem to abound in the Venerian jungle. Even small animals that might have been slain with a broken branch had contrary ideas about the matter.

At last, from sheer weariness, they stopped, and gathered branches to make a sloping shelter by a vast fallen tree-trunk.

"This will keep out the rain—maybe," Eric said hopefully. "And tomorrow, when it has quit raining—I'm sure we'll do better."

They crept in, as gloomy night fell without. They lay in each other's arms, the body warmth oddly comforting. Nada cried a little.

"Back up," Eric advised her. "We're back to nature—where we've always wanted to be."

With the darkness, the temperature fell somewhat, and a high wind rose, whipping cold rain into the little shelter, and threatening to demolish it. Swarms of mosquito-like insects, seemingly not inconvenienced in the least by the inclement elements, swarmed about them in clouds.

Then came a sound from the dismal stormy night, a hoarse, bellowing roar, raucous, terrifying.

Nada clung against Eric. "What is it, dear?" she chattered.

"Must be a reptile. Dinosaur, or something of the sort. This world seems to be in about the same state as the earth when they flourished there . . . But maybe it won't find us."

The roar was repeated, nearer. The earth trembled beneath a mighty tread.

"Eric," a thin voice trembled. "Don't you think—it might have been better—You know—the old life was not so bad after all."

"I was just thinking of our rooms, nice and warm and bright, with hot foods coming up the shaft whenever we pushed the button, and the gay crowds in the park, and my old typewriter."

"Eric?"

"Yes, dear."

"Don't you wish—we had known better?"

"I do." If he winced at the "we," the girl did not notice. The roaring outside was closer. And suddenly it was answered by another raucous bellow, at considerable dis-

tance, that echoed strangely through the forest. The fearful sounds were repeated, alternately. And always the more distant seemed nearer, until the two sounds were together.

And then an infernal din broke out in the darkness. Bellows. Screams. Deafening shrieks. Mighty splashes, as if struggling Titans had upset oceans. Thunderous crashes, as if they were demolishing forests.

Eric and Nada clung to each other, in doubt whether to stay or to fly through the storm. Gradually the sound of the conflict came nearer, until the earth shook beneath them, and they were afraid to move.

Suddenly the great fallen tree against which they had erected the flimsy shelter was rolled back, evidently by a chance blow from the invisible monsters. The pitiful roof collapsed on the bedraggled humans. Nada burst into tears.

"Oh, if only—if only—"

Suddenly flame lapped up about them, the same white fire they had seen as they lay on the crystal block. Dizziness, insensibility overcame them. A few moments later, they were lying on the transparent table in the Cosmic Express office, with all those great mirrors and prisms and lenses about them.

A bustling, red-faced official appeared through the door in the grill, fairly bubbling apologies.

"So sorry—an accident—inconceivable. I can't see how he got it! We got you back as soon as we could find a focus. I sincerely hope you haven't been injured."

"Why—what—what—"

"Why. I happened in, found our operator drunk. I've no idea where he got the stuff. He muttered something about Venus. I consulted his auto-register, and found two more passengers registered here than had been recorded at our other stations. I looked up the duplicate beam co-ordinates, and found that it had been set on Venus. I got men on the television at once, and we happened to find you."

"I can't imagine how it happened. I've had the fellow locked up, and the 'dry-laws' are on the job. I hope you won't hold us for excessive damages."

"No. I ask nothing except that you don't press charges against the boy. I don't want him to suffer for it in any way. My wife and I will be perfectly satisfied to get back to our apartment."

"I don't wonder. You look like you've been through—I don't know what. But I'll have you there in five minutes. My private car—"

* * *

Mr. Eric Stokes-Harding, noted author of primitive life and love, ate a hearty meal with his pretty spouse, after they had washed off the grime of another planet. He spent the next twelve hours in bed.

At the end of the month he delivered his promised story to his publishers, a thrilling tale of a man marooned on Venus, with a beautiful girl. The hero made stone tools, erected a dwelling for himself and his mate, hunted food for her, defended her from the mammoth saurian monsters of the Venerian jungles.

The book was a huge success. ♦

Interior Monologue



Bruce Bethke

Dark.

The gentle scent of a woman's perfume still hangs in the warm, quiet air.

Satin pillow cool under my head.

I think: my problem is I have too many lives. There's Ron Evans, Marcie's husband, father of Robbie, Becky, and Ron Junior, and king of the Woodbury barbecue. He's pretty close to Ronald Evans, VP Sales for The Hogan Group's DynaTech division, and the top-notch deal-maker you want in your corner when the chips are down.

From him it's not too much further to R.P. Evans, Boss From Hell, the mean sonofabitch the salesmen joke about when they think I'm not listening. (Morons. Don't they realize the intercom system works both ways?)

The one I don't understand is Ron. Just Ron.

He starts out normal enough—Ronald Evans on a sales trip, really—but put two toy Bacardi bottles under his belt and some Frequent Flyer miles on his soul and he's The Lonely Guy, a good provider whose fat frigid wife doesn't understand that a man has needs. Two more drinks in the hotel bar and he's Mister Party, who's got a gold card and a rental car and wants to know where a fella can find some fun in this town.

Two last drinks and he's The

Illustration by Scott Jurek

Desperate Soul, whose balls are a pair of ticking time bombs that'll kill him if he doesn't get laid.

I wonder: that perfume seems vaguely familiar. Should I open my eyes, see who she is? No, I decide, not yet. I already know what she looks like.

I like them young, skinny, and blonde. Straight hair, hint of a curl, teased a little on top, like a dandelion. Pale white skin, perky little tits, tight little ass that fits my hand, and long, long, skinny legs that go all the way up. I like them in my place, her place, hotel rooms, parked cars, dark alleys out back of the bar. I like the way you can stand there deep kissing a skinny one, and grab her ass with both hands, and she'll sort of jump up and wrap her thighs around you and you can take her right then, right there, nail her against the wall. I like short, slinky dresses, nylons with garters, and no underwear. I hate pantyhose, condoms, and anything else that gets in my way.

I hate complicated relationships. I tell them my name is Ron. Just Ron. They tell me their names, but I call them all "Honey" and lie that I love them.

I hate night sweats.

And thinning hair. And arthritic joints. And chronic diarrhea. And open sores. And the tight, bloated feeling of swollen lymph nodes in the neck, armpits, groin.

I hate the doctor at the anonymous free clinic in St. Louis. "I'm afraid it's bad news. Mister—"

"Ron," I say.

"Your T-cell count is in the cellar; your antibody count is through the roof. There is no mistake. You have AIDS."

I take a month to get my financials squared away, check out my health insurance, put all my ducks in a row. Then I get tested by my family doctor and break the news to Marcie, my wife. "I swear to God, honey. I don't know how I caught it. It must have been that transfusion after my surgery in '83."

She stands by me. Supports me, sympathizes with me, tests negative herself, even holds my hand as we break the news to the neighbors. Two weeks later Tawny, my perky little blonde secretary, tests positive and files a lawsuit the size of the national debt. DynaTech fires me before she's finished talking.

Marcie has the restraining order in hand before I pull into the driveway.

I take an apartment down in Loring Park, where people talk about AIDS the way suburban parents talk about chicken pox. The AZT makes me puke, so I start experimenting with street cures. Garlic enemas. Diachlorazine. CBT, RCS, MIC for the HIV, my bloodstream becomes an alphabet soup.

I feel soft, cool satin, under my fingertips. There's no fragrant warmth beside me; she must have left me alone. Still, the trace of her perfume lingers.

They come to know me in Loring Park. The shambling, dying guy who used to be someone important. The gullible chump with a fat wallet who'll buy anything that offers a ghost of a hint of a chance.

He's black. He's tall. He steps out of the deep shadows one sultry July night, his eyes hidden, his smiling teeth shining like old yellow ivory in the pale starlight. "Come with me, Ron. I got what you want." I follow him out of

the park, to a second-floor loft in the old warehouse district.

The girl who answers the door is pale, blonde, delicate and perfect. She tells me her name, but I forget it. The black man leaves; she takes me inside and introduces me to Butch, who's all languid sleek muscles and spiky red hair like Woody Woodpecker. The room is straight out of a tacky hot-sheets motel, with white satin and red vinyl everywhere. "We have HIV," she says.

"Great," I say. "Did I ask for a support group?"

"Not AIDS, asshole. Human Immortality Virus."

"Right. Thanks." I start for the door.

She touches me. It's been ages since a woman touched me like that. I stay, to listen.

"Call it kitchen-sink genetic engineering," she explains gently. "Someone at Mayo cobbled it up as a possible AIDS cure. The Feds killed the project—one undesirable side effect—but someone from ACT-UP smuggled a culture out. This virus triggers a massive infection that rewires your entire body on the DNA level. Afterwards, you've got regenerative powers you wouldn't believe and an immune system that can handle *anything*."

I look at her. I look deep, deep into those clear green eyes. She parts her lips slightly, licks her lips; her breath is sweet. Her small, hard nipples show through the fabric of her clingy white dress.

I find my voice. "And just how do I acquire the immortality virus?"

She steps closer, and runs her slim, perfect hands across my chest. She answers in a husky whisper. "You exchange bodily fluids with me."

My hands *ache* for her. I start to reach—

I turn to Butch. "And what do you get out of all this?"

He smiles, stretches, and yawns. Impossibly wide.

Showing all his teeth.

"I get to feed."

* * *

Dracula never had to face Ronald Evans, Dealmaker. Being mythical, he wouldn't have to, anyway. I don't buy the Prince of Darkness shit. No Middle Ages mysticism or undead bat people for this boy. I make Butch and the girl juggle crucifixes, sit under a sun lamp, and eat a plate of linguine al pesto before I make my decision. Butch spent a fortune on those fangs, cosmetic surgery and dental implants are not cheap and I make him show me all the receipts. The normal human jaw is not really designed for big canines: Carly Simon might make a passable vampire, but Bernadette Peters would starve to death. And the blood thing isn't some weird kink. The enhanced immune system burns a lot more hemoglobin and blood proteins than the standard model, but the virus doesn't tart up your marrow.

When I say yes, it's because I'm absolutely convinced that Butch and Honey are who they say they are: a couple of ordinary humans who had the good luck to get infected with a stolen engineered virus that reprograms the immune system.

That, and I've been staring at Honey's perfect little body for hours, and I'm horny as a three-balled tomcat.

Butch discreetly excuses himself, leaving me and Hon-

ey in the hot-sheets room. She steps back a pace, favors me with a shy smile, then peels her virginal white dress off over her head and casts it aside. Her breasts are small, firm, and high, with tight dark nipples; her belly gently rounded; her pube hair a soft, glossy thatch that tapers into a faint dark line stretching up to her navel.

I burst buttons in my eagerness to get my shirt off. I lurch Frankensteinian across the room, fighting my pants down around my knees, dying to bury my darting tongue in her golden perfection. She giggles like a schoolgirl as I take her, or she takes me, or whatever it is that happens. We gasp. We moan. We kiss, bite, suck, claw like mating tigers; I explode inside her.

She gives me a minute to catch my breath, then brings me to hardness again with her tongue.

* * *

Dawn. I wake to sticky vinyl, satin sheets in disarray, and beautiful golden hair draped like fine silk across my pillow. A plane of fresh sunlight slants through the open window, painting her skin in the glowing colors of Heaven. Never before have I awakened next to a woman who looked so . . . *satisfied*.

Dawn. With a small start, I remember that that's her name. The disturbance wakes her. She stretches, yawns, the white satin falls away to reveal her perfect little breasts. Her breath is sweet and pure; while I'm thinking she's still mostly asleep she surprises me, snakes an arm up around my neck, pulls me down into a deep kiss.

"I love you, honey," she whispers.

Butch enters the room, carrying a complication of tubing and glass. "Just need two pints," he says, as he gently slips the needle into my left arm at the elbow. I watch my blood pulse into the collection jar. While that's happening, Butch draws a few crimson cc's from Dawn's thigh and injects it into my butt, in case I didn't have enough contact with her mucous membranes.

And then Dawn and I get dressed, and the three of us drink a Type O toast to my immortality. Over ice, mixed with V-8 and a twist of lime, it's not too bad.

While Dawn is in the bathroom, Butch hits me with the rest of the pitch. Even vampires need rent money, he explains. But he doesn't want Dawn thinking he's some kind of *pimp*.

I understand. I expected this. I pay up. Dawn emerges from the bathroom, walks me to the door. "Remember," she says, "the incubation period is about a week. When the infection hits, you *must* be in a safe place where no one will find you for at least seventy-two hours. The dormant phase is when you are most vulnerable; if you get through that, you're home free."

I don't get through it. I'm sick. I'm exhausted. I stagger back to my apartment, light-headed from loss of blood, and what's left of my immune system craps out in less than a day. By the time the landlady gets worried by my silence and calls the paramedics, I'm already cold, paralyzed, and deep into dormant phase.

* * *

Memory Fragments: "Yes, that's him." I never knew Marcie could put such venom into three little words. "Don't bother with an autopsy. We know what he died from."

Rough gloved hands force my eyes open. Cold steel forceps stuff cotton balls under my eyelids. They take stitches, to keep the eyes from popping open at an inopportune moment. Pack cotton into my dick; sew my asshole shut to keep it from leaking. I try to let them know I'm still alive. Something moves.

"Oops. Looks like we've got a twitcher here! Tighten that leg strap, would you?" They lock me down, and sever the major tendons in my arms and legs to keep it from happening again.

Needles go into my pelvic blood vessels like dull railroad spikes hammered into my groin.

My God, my veins are on fire! They're pumping poison into my body, draining out my precious blood! I would scream if only I could move my diaphragm muscle.

Astonishing. My re-engineered body is taking it. I sense shifts in priorities: slow cellular migrations, as all energy is diverted to keeping the brain alive. Slowly, slowly, my system begins to break down the aldehydes, oxidize the methanol. I burn subcutaneous fat at a furious rate. Dawn wasn't kidding about my new regenerative powers. If I can just . . .

Grayout

Organ music! Heavy overpowering smell of carnations. "Dear! Beloved!" Pastor Bob drones on. "We are gathered . . ."

Grayout

"Think the old bastard's really dead?" someone whispers. I know that voice. It's that little weasel Kemper, from the East Coast session. What's he . . . ?

"Maybe we should have brought a wooden stake, boss." That's Herb Olson, my second-in-command. Herb, you backstabbing traitor son of a bitch, when I get out of here I'm going to . . .

Grayout

"Bye, Dad." That's Robbie, my little tough guy.

"Goodbye, Daddy." That's Becky, my sweetheart princess.

"Night-night, Daddy." And Ronnie Junior. I hear footsteps toddling away.

Marcie. I can tell just by listening to her breathe it's Marcie. Her voice is almost a hiss. "Goodbye, you rotten son of a bitch." Then louder, sweeter: "This was his favorite perfume." A splash of something cold, wet, and sickeningly floral splatters across my face and neck. Oh, God, not Tabu. Marcie, damn you, you know I always *hated this shit!*

They shut the heavy steel casket lid. The latches lock.

Grayout

* * *

I wake to the sound of earth being backhoed onto my grave. And darkness. And cool satin coffin-lining under my fingertips. And the rancid smell of Marcie's crummy perfume clogging my nose. And eyes that are stitched shut and packed with cotton, and a crippled, paralyzed, hamstringing body that's slowly digesting itself to keep my nearly immortal brain alive.

And the very cold, clear, complete realization that I could last like this for years. ♦

A Laureate Recalls

W. Gregory Stewart

I

Ping!

There goes one now, she says.
Where? I query—and Oh,
she says, I do not know—
but I know how fast it was.

Ping! (another Ping)

Well, that one then, I say—
how fast was that?
I don't know, she says, but it went
that-a-way, she says,
pointing in the general direction
of the Capitol.

(I am talking with Leona Schlesinger,
the Leona Schlesinger,
Queen of the research facility

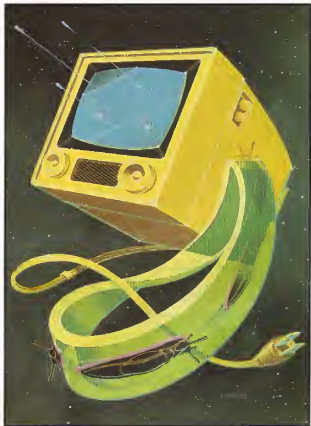


Illustration by David Lebeck

nicknamed Thermite Terrace,
and herself the premier
particle physicist of all time—
in fact, she is known in the particle field
as the Boson's mate.

Today, she is dressed in cyberpink and pearls—
she is natty, despite
aluminum rollers in her hair. And she is lucid,
for a change.

Dr Schlesinger has agreed to this interview
—her first in years—
after having just
been awarded
Nobel Prizes in Physics *and* Medicine.
Frankly, I would rather have covered The Beatles'
Prize for Literature, but since
only Ringo remains accessible, and I
am on assignment for
Field and Particle Stream,
I have opted for Aunt Leona.

We have met at Thermite Terrace (which
facility had been left to her
by Ilya Kurosawa,
an uncle from the Isle of Man).)

Ping. Clunk. I wince, and suddenly
I say something stupid.
Ah, says Dr Schlesinger—
I *know* where that one went.

II

Let me tell you how it all began, says Auntie L.
(Auntie L? Auntie L? Here I am, Auntie L.
I know, she says;
shut up and listen.)

I had been in attendance at a convention
for self-inflicting victims
of designer neuroses,
a meeting of the mindless and the manic
and the multiple—there
were a number of specialty events and I
was going to sit in on a presentation
to/for the
Self-Loathing Union of Genuine Solipsists
or SLUGS, as they chose to call themselves.

The speaker, a friend of mine and for whom
I was there at all at all
(she was a woman of parts,
Dr Schlesinger digressed—
implants, transplants,
house plants—we called her Fern),

was trying to make a serious point
and he cute simultaneously (there *are*

uncertainties involved)—
she had just said,
"You're somebody 'til nobody loves you."

and then paused for effect *and* affectation

when one of the front row center SLUGS
disappeared

(with a strangled arrggghh,
and in a puff of
nonexistent smoke)

This happens. Fern asided excitedly—watch.
I watched at her side.
2 SLUGS behind the first puffed *non*exis-
tently and arrggghhed a second later
then 4 behind them and 8 behind *them*—
moving outward and V-wise
a wedge was removed from the audience
in next to no time at all.

After a beat, some SLUGS from the rear
slid into the better seats up front;
that had now become available—
this caused a small squabble
and a large confusion between usher and ushee alike.

But forget about that—here
is the really important thing
and in fact
the epicenter of my epiphany. Although
later on this caused quite an episode w/ Fern
who wanted to claim a share of the fame
for having engendered this problem
quite multiply, which in fact I will
never mind, never mind—

I realized that THIS WAS NOT A RANDOM PROCESS,
that a very precise slice of whopist pie
had been cut from this audience
and that
it had not been a haphazard scattering of
disexistence among the singleminded misdiots
in attendance, but that there was evident
in fact a proper pattern.

One two four eight—
C how they disintegrate.

III

I went home that night and thought,
muses Dr S.,
about what I had seen.
And I thought about other things,
perhaps unrelated, but
(and this is a big but, a but
as big as Fern's epi-fanny)
perhaps not.

I thought about:

The continued adoration of the French for
Jerry Lewis, even *after*
electing him posthumously President;

The irony of wildebeests and wart hogs sharing
the same continent—and
your Uncle Louie and I, the same
planet;

Franklyn Mint editions, in crystal leaded or un-,
of faux vomit and poodle poop;

The fact that one can read
Rime of the Ancient Mariner
to the tune
(and, please,
DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME!)
of the theme from Gilligan's Island—
and it sounds *good*;

A woman in Poughkeepsie dreams of running water,
while in Lompoc, a baby wets itself—
coincidence? or something else . . . ?

IV

The very next day,

I assembled separate populations
of idiots savant,

one in series, and one
in a dormitory.

(This latter we called the Bubba-chamber
until the last election.

Then we called it
the dribble chamber until—but that
is another, uglier story.
Now it's just the Dorm.)

These were then exposed—
in very controlled fashion—
to a variety of alpha disrupters

ranging from visual—

the Lucy grape-stomping episode
run ad infinitum
run ad nauseam
run ad hoc and spit
and interspersed with clips of
Plan Nine From Outer Space—

to auditory—

Simon Chipmunk's solo debut album
(BlisterRap, the tox-rock thing)

to tactile—

Jello, molded
into Möbius strips

to taste—

see tactile: make it maraschino,
add marshmallow,
add mint

We omitted the olfactory right after
Dr Wainwright's
unfortunate episode w/
the dead skunk.

But nothing worked. Well, not until—
Oh, Joy! Oh, Serendipity!—
one evening, after a particularly
awful Lugosity, we
decided to take a break
and a barbecue,
and a beer and began
to sing 99 Bottles—

Drs Mooser and Eddy led the songfest,
ad libbing
99 bottles of beer on the wall
99 bottles of beer
take one down
put it right back
99 bottles of beer on the wall

I groaned and grimaced—they giggled.
And grinned. And the idiots
sang, savantishly.

Until, With the 99th repetition of
the endless lyrical loop,

one serial idiot and one Dormer
disappeared (arrggghing,
not-smoking—everything!).

The 100th rep saw one more serial
and two more Dormers down and out.

We looked at each other excitedly,
Drs Mooser and Eddy and I.
We let another chorus play out, just
to make sure the pattern held—
it did—and then
We shut them up—we served dessert.

After we had put our remaining
subjects to bed for the night,
we went to work . . . what?
Well, yes, "feverishly." Of course.

That

was supposed to go
without saying. Say—
just how long
have you been doing this, anyway?

V

here, now,
a metaphor, by way
of exposition (and man's speech *should*

exceed his grasp,
or what's a metaphor?

try this:
a chainlink fence
is mostly space, mostly empty—
a chainlink fence is mostly *not*,
except where it is ah,
but where it is, it matters—
and where it is, matter, yes,
and where it isn't, ain't.

now:
shoot a BB at a chainlink fence;
it will almost certainly pass through,
even if you aim—it hits
the links only rarely, not
having corrected its hook;
throw a pebble, randomly—
though slightly larger, it still stands
a fair chance of passage; throw
a rock (small enough to pass, but just)—
it hits the link, and falls
to the ground on your side. see?

and now another now:
let us say the BB is a good BIG IDEA,
and the chainlink
is an associational network,
neuronically based and interlinked
just so, eye-ee, a brain like yours
young Fred well maybe not *yours* exactly . . .
(author's note: my name is Oswald)—
anyway,
most good BIG IDEAS just pass on through,
and never make a dent—sometimes, though,
you catch what they throw. You get
a good idea, an inspiration, a flash of insight,
a stroke of genius.

but throw an idea hard enough, and when it hits,
the fence (the *brain*)
gives way AND the good BIG IDEA
becomes just a passing thought,
right on through—to the next fence, maybe.
it's something like that.

(all of which makes this a simile, I suppose,
and nothing metaphorical. . .)

and now not a now but or else—
sometimes when it hits dead on,
the BIG IDEA splits
(schisms into isms
like light thru prisms)
and the original chainlink brain
is only migrated,
while two (or more) lesser but larger
(and possibly still good and BIG,
but and on the other hand too possibly

incomplete) thoughts travel on,
until they hit other brains—sometimes
these smaller pieces are the same,
more or less: sometimes each
is just a part of something larger.

Examples? Oh,

Darwin and Wallace.
Einstein* and Heisenberg.
Bell and the Patent Office.
Lauper and Madonna.
Kinison and Goldthwait.
and Tim Pinnegan

It doesn't always—they don't always—
hit, but when they do . . .

but, and however, and that's not all—
when the good BIG IDEA (or BI prime particle)
splits
into its secondary particles
(WITs—the Well It's a Thought particles,
which are the building blocks of
BIG IDEAS, and of course half-WITs)—these
are *larger* than the original
BB-sized brain bomb as the sub-particles
lose speed, it seems, they get larger
oh, yes—
and denser, and
the larger and denser the particle,
the smaller its associated IQ
(idative quanta) count, but the larger
the proportion of the population popped
soon
other articles join the party—
the biggest hits, the ones we d all
be better off without, these final
fallout quanta are the
quirks (the quirk
is characterized
by an irrational number called snarm—
while the anti-quirk is charmed, I'm sure)
unfortunately, the natural electromagnetic
properties of the human brain form
a perfect quirk confinement field,

and the quirk is so large and
(as mentioned) dense
that it can't
pass through without hitting something—
rather like your Uncle Louie
in a china shoppe—
well, hey, voila! we find the root source

* "God does not throw dice—or tantrums." Note: Dr Schlesinger has always considered chaos a science for men. Her theory is that any gender that cannot ask for directions at a service station is likewise incapable of simply admitting that it doesn't know enough—yet—to attempt to make a meaningful prediction. She believes chaos to be formalized laziness AND a weak rationalization for masculine intellectual insecurity.

of all human bloody-mindedness AND
human genius as
the degradation of the quirk
in confinement
yields

THE MESHUGATRON

*

the meshugatron—

from missing matter
to missing links (cuff or human or hot)
says Dr S.,
the meshugatron does it all,
and windows, too.
Elegantly—

the meshugatron gives us a GUT^{*}
that can even account for the continued existence
of anchovy-and-onion pizza^{*}
while at the same time defining
gravities A, B, and Q.^{**}

a cosmology embracing
the meshugatron will accurately
predict new age fads and tail fins,
while simultaneously invalidating
either and each.

* Observe how the poet once again utilizes the anchovy-and-onion pizza motif. One can only speculate about what this symbol really means, and how it came to affect his life.

Some scholars have compared this to Salvador Dalí's recurring use of paint

** Gravity-A: the little gravity which we call aunty,
relatively speaking

Gravity-B: Walmea—or big wave—gravity.

Gravity-Q: simply a side effect of quantum space, and
little more than a belch erupting from the
belly of—no, wait, cavity gravity, a curious
pit on the cuspid of—no, not that, either.
Cheez, when footnotes go bad, ya know?

Indeed, the discovery of the meshugatron
has redefined human existence
and the world,
and the world has beaten a pathway
to my Aunt Leona's door,
although mostly for the mousetrap

*

She is silent a moment, then—

these are not rollers in my hair. Young Fred,
she says suddenly, looking
blue and mean, although
my name remains Oswald—these
are deflectors. One does not opt to be bopped
by a meshugatron safely more than once in life—

just look at Leury, she says. Look
at Linus Pauling. Look at Philo T. Farnsworth—he
is not an example, really, but his name
could be, don't you think?

She falls silent again

VI

Auntie Dr begins to stare into
whatever distant eternity it is
to which great minds escape in revere.

She remains silent until

Uncle Louie comes in and clears away
breakfast. I grab a last croissant—
he grabs it back.

You should go, he tells me, as
he puts a tape in the player,
she has. I see that he is right.

1

Carefully—lovingly—he removed
the rollers from her hair.
He starts the tape—Lucy
is already in the vat.

I leave as he takes one down. And puts it right back.

Ping . . .

♦

The Experiment



Sergey Strel'chenko

"Damn teeth! Will toothaches be eliminated ten years from now? No—first they'll find cures for cancer and leprosy." Howell took a pill for the pain and glanced up to a homemade calendar hanging on the wall. "The morning of the 1,095th day. Exactly three years. It's symbolic," he muttered. Howell skipped breakfast and entered the laboratory that he had begun building three years ago.

From the appearance of the equipment occupying the entire underground floor of the Green Villa, no one uninitiated could tell anything about the purpose and character of the work being done here. There were cylindrical glass jars standing on round cork supports, a transparent amphora-shaped vessel, and the tangle of a multitude of wires of various colors and sizes.

All of this apparatus surrounded three sides of a small,

Illustration by Peter Bole

level platform with a circle in the center a meter and a half in diameter.

Sitting in an armchair which stood opposite the observation site, Howell switched on a light and then flicked on the power supply switch. In a few seconds, a shining red dot appeared within the transparent amphora. It moved out of the vessel and over the circle cut in the center of the platform, expanding until it became a half a meter and a half in diameter. The ball, floating in darkness, began to change color, turning from red to a dazzlingly brilliant white-blue. Then the white-blue ball slowly lost its brightness and became more and more transparent.

Finally, a ripple ran along its surface, and the sphere expanded to occupy the entire platform. Through a layer of phosphorescent mist lying just above the surface of the platform, Howell could see the outlines of certain objects, the movements of human figures with blurred features. The mist dissipated and he saw a part of his study on the first floor of the Green Villa, where he himself—ten years older, wearing long hair and a beard—was in the company of a young blonde girl and a paunchy man of great height. Judging from the movement of the man's lips and his animated gestures, he and the man were discussing something energetically. The silent picture lasted not more than half a minute and then disappeared.

After returning to his study, Howell opened his diary to make a concluding entry: "The experiment ended successfully. I succeeded in penetrating a period of ten years into the future, and I saw a part of the future world.

"We may now suppose, after this first experimental use of the chronocamera, that, despite the opinion of many skeptics, the world will not be turned into a nuclear desert in ten years. That is a general conclusion. Otherwise, how could this view be explained?

"Now the specific: Green Villa won't fall victim to fire or some other catastrophe. I will be long-haired and bearded, and I'll receive guests as usual in my study on the first floor.

"I don't know who the huge paunchy man is with the remains of light curly hair. I have no such acquaintance, neither in business nor in the scientific world. And I know nobody who'll become such a person in ten years. Possibly, even very likely, he is some kind of representative of an interested company and, judging from his excited talk, my affairs in the future are not going so badly.

"As for the blonde girl, she looks something like Idris Lee. Nowadays everyone is calling her a movie star of the first magnitude, at the beginning of her career. How does she come to be in my company?

"It's no use racking my brains over who they are and why they are here. The most important fact is that the present-day Howell has seen his future self. That means I'll be alive in ten years—of this I am firmly convinced.

"For a man who has seen himself alive in the future is thereby guaranteed immune to accidents and other acts of violence that might threaten his life in the present.

"He may lie under the wheels of a train—but the train will jump the track or be blown up by terrorists in the middle of its journey, or a strike of railway workers will

begin, or simply the schedule will be changed. And it is not even excluded that he himself will remove his head from the rails at the last moment. He may swallow poison, but he will confuse it with another substance or it will prove powerless on him.

"It's difficult to say exactly what will happen if, deciding to break the cause-and-effect connection, he hurls himself from the roof of a skyscraper or dives into a vat of molten metal, but in any case he will remain alive, since the single possible variant of the future cannot be changed by an event in the present."

When he had finished writing, Howell took a pistol from a drawer and put it to his head. He pulled the trigger, and the gun gave off a dry click. "It must be so," said the experimenter, and pulled the trigger again. A shot rang out.

* * *

The black-bearded, long-haired man put the pistol on the table and tiredly raised his hands.

"This is going nowhere, Dave. Really, this Howell is a man standing on the brink of death and on the verge of stepping over it," said the paunchy giant roughly.

"Enough, Henry, we've already heard that a thousand times," said the blonde girl, a movie star at the height of her glory. "Describe better to me how the scene will be. Dave—that is, Howell—enters after getting the letter, and what do you think I should be doing at this time?"

The director anxiously kept quiet, he had considered this scene the climax of the movie, but he hadn't quite thought it through to the end.

* * *

The death of the young, very promising scientist had given birth to a host of rumors. Various theories emerged, ranging from death in an unsuccessful experiment to suicide as a result of unrequited love. The actual cause of death remained unknown because, when the last words of the diary were being written, a fire had broken out from a short circuit in the laboratory and was already gathering strength to spread throughout the building. Green Villa remained standing, but most of its contents were charred beyond recognition.

After a few days, a journalist who had known the deceased wrote an article in which he thoroughly and most informatively assessed the degree of probability of the different hypotheses, placing the emphasis on the last romantic version.

In four years this man became the author of a book based on the newspaper article. The book was a great success. The popularity of the work was due to its story not being spun from thin air: its hero was real, and a man who had departed life not long ago, and the author had even known him personally. In another six years, Henry Styron, the film director, decided to make a very realistic movie based on this bestseller. The set where the important scenes of the movie were shot was Green Villa itself, which had been restored to its original appearance. The director was especially proud of the fact that the actor playing the leading role was the spitting image of the man being depicted. ♦

Prospero



Scott Baker

The manager finished introducing him: Dr. Prospero Verhuni, the world's greatest mentalist, just back from his Pacific Rim tour, a talent that defies all scientific explanation, etc. All of it but his name true—he was even a doctor—though not in any way anyone in the club was likely to guess.

The audience started clapping dutifully and the ridiculous patched velvet curtains, obviously salvaged from some defunct cinema palace, drew back to reveal him.

What he wanted, what he had always wanted, was to come striding swiftly and silently up out of the backstage darkness, transfix his audience with a single smoldering glance, hold them with a gesture, command their fear and fascination with the impossible and intimate knowledge of their most secret lives he would so disdainfully display.

As it was, his brittle, twisted legs kept him from leaving the high-backed crimson plush armchair he had had the manager position for him a ways back from the tiny stage's front edge, where he was relatively safe from the club's drunken and obnoxious clients at their tightly packed tables. And the prosthetic plastic arm he wore fitted over the clumsy four-fingered flipper that was the only real

Illustration by Bob Jellins

right arm he had ever had was incapable of any but the most awkwardly functional gestures, so any attempt at the Satanic magnificence other performers achieved so easily would have only made him look foolish, or worse, pathetic. He had to work for his audience's fear and fascination, suffer their contempt instead of making them suffer his.

He sat stiffly upright, rigid, a slim, pale, aging, grungish-looking man glaring impotently out at the half-filled club. Envyng them all and hating them for the envy he couldn't help but feel, for the arrogant superiority he couldn't summon up, couldn't believe in. Hating himself for the way he needed them.

"A mentalist is someone who knows things he has no way of knowing, and knows them whether or not you want him to," he said by way of beginning. His voice was a bit high, overly precise; a victim's voice. The junior high school teacher's pet who gets heated up every day after class. "They offer to tell you what's in your wallet or who your dentist is or how many days ago you last changed your socks. I don't work that way unless I have to. I like to let you make up your own questions and challenges. That way you know I haven't rigged things, that what I'm doing up here is genuine and not just an act.

"Because it isn't just an act. I really do know your innermost secrets and I'm ready to demonstrate it. Would any of you care to try to prove me wrong?"

A tall heavy-set man at one of the front tables pushed back his chair and stood up. "Me." He was about Prospero's age—forty, maybe forty-five—and starting to go to fat. Red-faced, jowly, wearing a blue and gray pin-striped suit, a dark blue shirt, a tie whose color matched his florid face. Probably an insurance salesman, Prospero had seen him sitting in the back drinking with the three men at the table next to his the night before.

"Excellent." Only Prospero's head and neck moved as he spoke. The audience glanced at him, then back at the insurance salesman, who was clearly the more colorful of the two even though Prospero was on stage and the salesman in the audience. Prospero had no stage presence, no facility, no skill with words or his voice. Only his talent, so his audiences had to provide themselves with their own performers, their own amusement.

"You were here last night," Prospero continued. The man nodded. "And so now you've worked out a challenge you think I won't be able to handle. What is it?"

The salesman held up a cheap-looking glossy red leather purse. "My wife's handbag. I don't think even she knows what's inside." He paused.

"If I understand you correctly, you want me to tell you what's inside your wife's purse?"

"I want you to tell us all what's in it right now, out loud, not just write something down for somebody to check later like you did last night."

"Certainly." He looked out to the audience, gave them what he hoped was an ironic smile. "Would any of you like to add to these conditions, or take any other steps you think necessary to see that the challenge is fairly met?"

No one had any conditions to add. The salesman put one massive hand on the purse as if to keep it from scuttling away, and said, "Get started."

"A compact, a bottle of perfume, lipstick—"

"What color?" Gloating openly, stringing Prospero along so that his failure, when it was revealed, would be all the more humiliating.

"Orange. Your wife must be . . . most unusual." One of the men at the next table frowned. Prospero noticed that the left side of his face was twitching slightly. But the salesman hadn't noticed his friend's reaction; his smirk had escaped his last attempts at concealment, spread like a diseased rictus to engulf his entire face. Prospero forced himself to continue naming random feminine items, until the end, then finished with, "—and to cap it off, three dead goldfish in a plastic sandwich bag!" just to make the salesman look bad for an instant.

Then the part he hated worst came as the salesman yanked open the purse, started pulling out fishing tackle, a can of baked beans, a tiny tightly capped marschino cherry jar with the label still on it in which a baby turtle painted mauve with "PENTWATER MICHIGAN" on its back in day-glo yellow was suffocating though Prospero could see its legs moving as it struggled to escape—proving he hadn't been far wrong in his reading of the man—then an insurance policy made out to "PROSPERO THE FAKE" and finally a card on which the salesman had printed in clumsy block letters: IF YOUR SO SMART WHY HAVEN'T YOU MADE A KILLING IN LOS VEGAS OR ON THE STOCK MARKET?

Prospero forced back the memory of what the casino's thugs had done to him the one time he had tried to do just that, took a final look at the items spread out on the salesman's table, then stepped *outside*, walked back to the moment when the fat man had told him to get started. He whispered the right answers to the *inside* self who was still sitting there facing the audience, then slowly returned to the moment when he had stepped *outside*, fighting the flow that tried to accelerate his forward motion as he dawdled, watching his *inside* self give all the correct answers. He quit resisting the flow, let it carry him back again at its own pace, savoring the way the challenger's smirk dissolved first into confusion and then, momentarily, into wonder, which gave way to suspicion and finally to the certainty that he had been tricked somehow into making a chump out of himself in front of his friends and a lot of strangers.

That was the best of all, the insurance salesman's furious uncomprehending helplessness, the way even his friends were laughing at him (though the man with the facial twitch still looked upset about something) and Prospero savored it the longest before stepping past the moment in which his *inside* self responded, "What makes you think I haven't?" to the question on the card to find himself once more confronting the angry burning chaos that was the future, sidestepped it back into the moment he had left and rejoined his *inside* self.

Inside again, he forgot everything that had happened to him *outside*, just as he forgot the way things had happened before his intervention changed them. He remembered only his own voice whispering answers in his ear, the sequence of events in which he had effortlessly named the items in the purse and answered the question written on the card before having a chance to see it.

The salesman was sitting down in confusion, reaching for his glass. Prospero said, by way of closing, "You certainly must have an unusual wife," got the expected minimal laughter and chuckles in response and was turning towards someone else when the man with the twitching face leapt up and yelled, "If you're not a fake, let's see what you've got hidden up that night sleeve of yours!"

His speech was slurred but he sounded furious. Probably some sort of drug reaction, too much alcohol mixed with whatever medication he was taking for his twitch.

"Yeah!" the salesman yelled, scenting Prospero's vulnerability. "Take off your coat!"

Prospero briefly considered doing just that, letting them all see his flipper so they could know just how they were being shown their helpless inferiority by someone who wasn't even whole, a gene-damaged freak, but if he did he would have to step *outside* and replay the whole sequence from the beginning again anyway, so he just stepped *outside*, went back to the moment in which his *inside* self had made the comment and warned him not to say anything that could set off the man with the twitch.

Prospero took the few steps back to the moment he had left—it wasn't really walking, but that was what it felt like, taking steps that spanned the moments as he passed the new sequence taking shape till he was staring straight into the future's swirling flames, could feel it blazing on his face. But then, suddenly, he couldn't face going back *inside* again, couldn't bear his crippled, deformed body and the audience's hostility yet one more time.

Turning his back on present and future, he started walking. At first he only intended to go back to the beginning of the tour, cancel it, and spend the time instead in the isolation of his home in the Vermont woods. But when he reached the moment when he had made the decision to go on tour again, he found he couldn't face the house's seclusion either, couldn't bear sitting in his specially built chairs and waiting for his clumsy, too rapidly aging body to give out completely. He had to go back to his birth and conception, try to heal himself, make himself whole, yet one more time.

It was the hope that kept him going, that made his life worth living. Some day he would find out how to change what he was, he reborn like a phoenix from the ashes of a no-longer-existent past.

He had no memory of ever having tried before but he knew that he had because, returning, he had told his *inside* self about his earlier attempts. Otherwise he would never have been aware of their existence: returning *inside*, he lost all memory of *outside*, and even when he went back *outside* again the lost memories remained beyond recall. Some sort of survival mechanism, he had theorized, a way to keep himself from losing himself in a confusion of no-longer-real pasts and contradictory presents.

He strode rapidly past all the events he no longer dared tamper with because he no longer knew what events they'd replaced, but only what his *outside* selves had told his *inside* self about them: the times he had been told to keep out of various casinos (and that one time his *outside* self had not warned him, had only whispered to him, there in the hospital bed where he had lain three weeks

recovering, that it was necessary this once that he remain *inside* and suffer the heating) . . . the time his *outside* self had warned him away from that prostitute in Chicago who'd seemed so understanding, that series of experiments he had been told not to volunteer for back in medical school, where he had specialized in genetics, the numerous specialists he had considered consulting but had been told were a waste of time.

Watching himself get younger and younger as he continued back along his lifeline, more and more helpless and yet at the same time further and further away from that inevitable moment when his *inside* body would fail him.

Back past that first time—he had been eleven—when he had come into possession of his power, that first time he had ever stepped *outside* and been free. A time he was afraid to meddle with, because anything that kept the talent from manifesting itself would be irreparable.

Back to the moment of his birth, his mother groaning there on the hospital table, back beyond, to when he had been only a malformed fetus in her womb. He knew he had done this before, though he had only the memory of that one time his *outside* self had warned him against an attempt he was preparing to make to go back and change his destiny.

He could, his *outside* self had told him, whisper to his father and mother in the same way he could whisper to his *inside* self—they, too, were part of him, or he of them, and so not cut off from him the way all other persons except his own *inside* selves were when he went *outside*—and he had whispered to his sleeping father that there was something wrong with his unborn son, that he had to get a doctor, save the child. . . . His father had believed the voice was his own, taken it for some sort of prompting from God or intuition, with the result that he had had his wife examined and had seriously considered having the fetus aborted despite everything the *outside* Prospero could do to dissuade him, until at last he found a doctor doing pioneering work in prenatal surgical intervention . . . and whose intervention, Prospero's *outside* self had told him, had resulted in the twisted and useless legs where Prospero had previously had healthy legs, only the flipper-arm to mark his deformity. . . . It had been too late to change what had happened. Prospero had no memory of any such past, no way of finding the track along which his former lifeline had progressed so he could return to it; he was afraid that any attempt to keep his father from deciding to have his wife examined would only further arouse the man's worries, perhaps push him to a decision in favor of abortion—

Prospero continued back through his mother's pregnancy, discovering his parents together—Jack and Mary Merimee, two healthy, happy, altogether nonexceptional people with little in common with the parents he had known—back to the moment of his conception, in Jack's parents' house, which Jack's broad-minded father had loaned the couple for the weekend a few months before their marriage. Even *outside*, he could feel it happen, a sudden wash of excitement as his *inside* self came into existence. But the moment was intolerable, it infuriated him, showed him in the most graphic and painful way

possible everything he should have been and wasn't, that he had been denied—these two healthy young people taking such unthinking pleasure in their bodies and their lovemaking—so he pressed on further, back to the events preceding his proper existence.

Progress was harder on the far side of conception, like swimming half-blinded through weed-choked waters. His parents' lifelines split and he had no choice but to follow them both back simultaneously. Perhaps it was the difficulty, the resistance, perhaps something else—some vestigial remnant of his medical training, maybe—that made him stop and watch them closely at that specific moment just before they went to bed, made love, brought him into existence. . . .

"Jack, could you get me some aspirin?" His mother's voice, coming from the living room, where she was sitting reading. "I've got this terrible headache."

"Sure. Two?"

"Make it five. My head's really killing me."

. . . some instinct that kept him there, watching, as the tall athletic man glanced into the medicine cabinet, reached in and grabbed the wrong bottle.

Shook five lavender and blue tablets of a phytylglutamamide derivative Prospero recognized from a textbook out onto the palm of his hand, recapped the dusty bottle and put it back on the shelf without looking at the label.

Prospero knew all about phytylglutamamide derivatives. He had been sent to a special school where some of the other children were phytylglutamamide casualties, had studied the drug's effects in medical school. He knew everything there was to know about phytylglutamamide, except that he had never known that it was what had made him into what he was.

His parents had always denied they had ever used it. He had asked them about it repeatedly, back when he was in the special school, hoping to at least find a reason for his deformity, a group, however pathetic, to which he belonged. But they were at his grandfather's house, not their own; neither of them must ever have realized there had been anything unusual about the pills.

But now that he knew all he had to do was whisper in his future father's ear that he had the wrong pills and then his troubles would be over. He would be conceived and born whole, with no need to adopt the name and role behind which Thomas Merimée had chosen to hide.

Whole and perfect, banal and ordinary. A true son to Jack Merimée, mediocre high school biology teacher and wrestling coach.

Except that no healthy child could ever be *him*. The new Thomas Merimée would be someone as different from Prospero as Prospero was different from the drunken salesman. Yet Prospero could return to that altered present, melt into it and forget his misery, his envy, his physical pain for a happier new life.

Nothing he had ever done had rendered his life tolerable or ever been of any real value to anyone else. But he still couldn't whisper the necessary words to this ordinarily unthinking man who would soon become his father, couldn't lose the only thing that made his life worth continuing, not even for the final fulfillment of that life's

greatest hope. Because fulfilled here and now, before his life had even begun, the meaning that hope had given his existence became senseless. Ridiculous. His whole life, his heroic struggle to overcome his crippling condition, would become only waste and pain better forgotten, that would be forgotten, cease to have ever existed, as soon as he shed his memories of the *outside* and merged back into the new *inside* self his intervention would bring into existence. Just as all the minor pains and humiliations he had so many times plotted from existence had ceased to have ever existed.

All he had to do was whisper the truth but he couldn't make himself do it, couldn't blot himself out.

He let the current carry him forward a little, past the point where his father gave his mother the sleeping pills that were as much his parent as they were, stopped and watched her swallow them. When they went back into the bedroom together he turned away, let the current carry him all the way back to the present.

It was only as he was once again poised back *outside* the nightclub and his *inside* self's pitiful triumph over the salesman and his cronies, the future's raging heat burning the right side of his face, that he realized that this must have happened before.

Perhaps it happened every time he went *outside*. He was suddenly certain that it did, that every time his *outside* selves had returned and whispered to him about their futile efforts to change things they had been lying.

Perhaps the whole story about how the whispers in his father's ears had resulted in his twisted legs was just another lie, one of his earlier *outside* selves protecting its own stunted existence just as he was preparing to protect his now.

His whole life's struggle, his agony and heroism, were not only lies, *they were his own fault*. And that rendered it all not just meaningless but detestable.

How many times had he realized the same thing, felt the same self-loathing?

All he had to do was merge with his *inside* self and forget it all over again, but he could no more bring himself to do that than he had been able to whisper the necessary words in his father's ear.

He turned to face the future's seething, churning fires, tried to force himself forward into them, but their intolerable heat and violence drove him back to the nightclub. He stared for a long time in at the frozen scene, his crippled, deformed body, the audience cycling him with a mixture of condescending curiosity and frustrated hostility, even outright hatred from the salesman and his cronies.

Eventually he retraced his steps, remounted the time stream to his conception and beyond, back to the moment that had made him what he was, and then hesitated again.

Perhaps this, too, was something he did every time, a point he always reached before his cowardice drove him back.

Then, at last, knowing that he was finally doing something he could never have done before, that he was finally breaking free of his intolerable life and its petty triumphs, its everlasting pain, he whispered in his father's ear and was gone. ♦

A Taste of Success

Pamela D. Hodgson

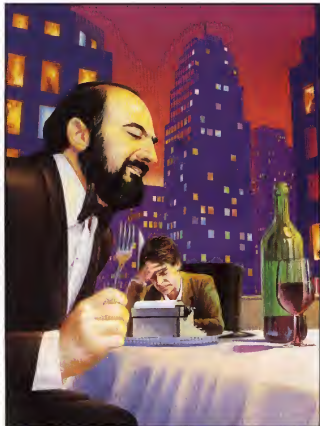


Illustration by Mark Soulerus

The night I met MacKenzie it was raining. He stood next to me in a crowd at one Astor Street party or another, and I could sense his need over all the others like the keening wail of an animal in the storm. We were pressed together with all the others—the furrier Kimballs and the old-money Waterasons prominent among them, drunk with extravagance and ignorance and levity—under the limestone porch waiting for the cars to be brought around. MacKenzie's eyes darted back and forth, watching himself be watched, and trying not to be caught in the act.

The guests covered a bit, wary of a change in the wind off the lake that might drench them, much as they would be doused in October of 1929, still some time off. MacKenzie shrunk from the torrent and the searching beam of the headlamps moreso than the rest. I knew the type. I guessed—correctly—that he had no car, that he only stood with the rest in the hope he would be offered a ride, or at least be afforded the chance to slip away to the street-car unobserved. He hoped to be mistaken for one of their kind. That was only part of his need.

I situated myself so that he was guaranteed to stumble into me. With the contact—his awkward stomp on my foot, my hand on his elbow as if to assist him—his aching lust for fame and fortune coursed into me. I could taste it, ferric as blood on my tongue, and it satisfied me.

He apologized, of course. His voice conveyed an excellent imitation of brash self-confidence; it surprised and pleased me. I could see how he'd managed to insinuate himself into these sorts of soirees. He stuck out a hand—manicured, though not recently—and introduced himself. "Jonathan R. MacKenzie," he said. "I'm in hotels."

"DeVille, Jason DeVille," I told him. The wind did change then—my doing? I'm never quite sure how much is my influence when I don't do it consciously—and he turned to avoid the gust of rain. I slipped away.

It didn't take much in the way of discreet inquiry to learn that "in hotels" meant that MacKenzie worked as a bookkeeper at the Lakeshore Hotel. I waited a day or two before I presented myself in the doorway of his tiny office. The requisite green lampshade cast a sickly glow across his lean young features. I framed myself in the doorway and cleared my throat to make myself known.

He was startled to see me, to have someone from his pretended life intrude upon his reality, but he hid it quickly. I glanced around his office, to let him see that I noted the incongruity, then I smiled broadly. He returned the smile as he stood to shake my hand. "DeVille, isn't it?"

"Yes. I was in the neighborhood, and I thought I'd see if you were free for lunch." I paused very briefly. I could almost bear him mentally patting his pockets. "As my guest."

"Delighted." He snatched his brown tweed jacket off a hook on the back of the walnut door and shrugged into it. The jacket was well made, I noted, but also well worn. He caught me eyeing it as we left the office, and sought to distract me. "Well. Have you seen much of the hotel?" He pointed at a fresco on the lobby ceiling, painted in shades of bronze and gold. "They've done a nice job, don't you think?"

I agreed, even though I found it garish and tasteless. We exited into the bright spring sun, its warmth stolen away by a breeze off the lake. I guided him along the drive toward the Drake Cafe. The scent of dying alicewives stayed in my nostrils even after we were indoors.

His urge for fame and fortune was strong, but I knew from long experience that it would wither and die if not nurtured and fed. I savored it as he sat across the black-lacquered table from me, and decided the flavor was piquant enough to be worth the trouble. That decision made, I do not fail to get what I desire.

I chatted about my travels and acquaintances. When I mentioned Scott Fitzgerald, I got the response I was looking for: MacKenzie's amber-speckled eyes lit like gaslight, and his lips parted slightly, as if with desire.

I didn't tell him the role I'd had in the writing of *Gatsby*. I let him talk instead.

"I saw him once," Fitzgerald, I gathered. "I was in New York, and he and Zelda passed me on the street—swept past me, really. They were magnificent. I started to follow them, but then I thought, what was I going to do if I caught

up? Try and press my stories into his hands and ask his guidance? Tell him I've been trying to emulate him? I'd look like a fool. So I just watched them go, him cutting a silhouette sharp as a crease, Zelda trailing far like an afterthought." I wondered how long he had spent devising the images, and how long he had waited to share them with someone.

"Your stories? Do you write, then, MacKenzie?"

He stared down at his empty plate until the waiter shipped it out from under his gaze. He looked back up at me. Before he could formulate a reply, I spoke again. "I don't know Perkins, his editor, very well, but I could probably ask Scott to look at something of yours, and if it's any good, have him pass it on to Perkins. If you'd like."

He smiled at me the stupid smile of a young lover. I returned a look not unlike lust. It startled him momentarily, then he adjusted his own expression to match mine. Clearly, he was willing to do anything. I tasted his lust, and it was thick and sweet like sherry. Too sweet to become drunk upon, but a wonderful rich flavor nonetheless.

We agreed to meet a week hence, at which time he would give me something to take to Scott Fitzgerald on my next trip to New York. I looked forward to the chance to be near Scott, to sip at his insecurities and doubts, almost as much as I savored the sharp young vintage that was MacKenzie.

* * *

Scott Fitzgerald was almost as delicious as I remembered. Despite the success of *Gatsby*, the acclaim he received—not to mention the money—despite the bevy of secretaries who typed his every jotting and neatly filed them in alphabetical notebooks for him, the man would never be entirely sure of himself, would never stop dreading some single, elusive word that would praise or damn him once and for all.

Fitzgerald was drinking now, though, more than before. For him, it blunted some of the angst. For me, it turned some of the taste of his pain to vinegar. I spoke to him about it, told him the liquor could ruin his career, but he only laughed and poured himself another gin. Zelda came in from the doorway where she hovered, listening. She was still young then, but as she brushed a meaningless kiss across my cheek, I could see the face of the woman she would become—a woman striving fruitlessly to avoid growing old. I looked forward to the taste of it.

The Fitzgeralds' need would always be strong. But it would never be as potent as it had been in the beginning. And so it became more important for me to bring MacKenzie along, to tantalize him with the hint of satisfaction of his deepest, most passionate yearnings, so that those cravings would be slow to fade and disappear.

* * *

It stormed the next time I saw MacKenzie. I was so attuned to him, so hungry, that I could smell his neediness above the electric wetness of the air even before I rounded the corner to the point where I would—inadvertently, he was to think—run into him on the sidewalk. There was a certain new tang, a saltiness, to it.

He smiled up at me like an eager child greeting an approving father. I did not find his gratitude nearly so pleas-

ant as the simulated brashness I'd noted at our original meeting. I gave him a perfunctory handshake. "MacKenzie. You'll be glad to know that I passed your stories on to Scott. Don't know what he thought. Didn't say much. Perhaps I'll hear from him."

He hid his disappointment rather well, I thought, and the effort brought the bravado back. "Great of you to do that for me. I appreciate it." The eagerness wasn't entirely gone. "How was he? Was he well, I trust?"

"Fine. Fine." I hurried on, as if to some important appointment that the likes of Jonathan MacKenzie would always pretend to have, but never actually merit. I left him stammering in my wake.

I made sure over the next several weeks to attend several of the same functions as he did. At each event, I placed myself where he would spot me, but was cautious to avoid sufficient proximity that we should speak. I will confess that the last was difficult, given that the very thought of him left me salivating. But one learns the virtue of delayed gratification over the years.

At last, he gave up trying to approach me. He was like a scorned lover; having tried to earn back what was lost (or never gained), he had reached the threshold of despair, where love turns to hate. Of course it wasn't love in MacKenzie's case, but rather lust, and not for me personally (though the possibility had occurred to me, but I felt it wiser—as always—to delay gratification and enjoy the richer pleasure to come), that motivated him. I made myself ever more evident wherever I expected him to turn up. I could feel the discomfort roll through his stomach like a tide of lava whenever I approached.

I made a point, of course, of asking about his writing whenever we met, preferably among as large a crowd as possible. Through my ministrations, he became widely known as an unpublished writer, with emphasis upon "unpublished." I tasted his shame at the word. It was bitter and rich, like espresso with chocolate. I reveled in it.

But Jonathan MacKenzie was not easily overcome. I saw him at the same Astor Street address where we had first come into contact. Light glinted off the deco chandelier, all sharp-angled geometries, and crumbled into a thousand ragged shapes against the ivory-painted walls. Servants in starched black and white waltzed between the groups, spinning to offer a tray of canapés here, glass of champagne there. Their smooth motion was counterpoint to the sharp syncopation of the jazz music produced by a band of Negro musicians exiled to a corner of the ballroom. Through it all, I could taste the various needs and desires of each person in the room. I singled out the various flavors. None was stronger than the rest.

MacKenzie's voice blended with the voices from each of the little conversational clots that dotted the polished parquet floor. He was at the center of the room with a circle of guests around him, all more fashionable than he could ever hope to be. Yet I could sense no discomfort from him, none of the usual desire to hide his circumstances from the prying eyes that mark a man by the cut of his suit and the fabric of his shirt. If anything, he had made less effort than usual to fit in. He wore the same tweed jacket, teetering on the precipice of shabbiness, that he'd

worn when we went to lunch. It had new elbow patches, I noted, of deep brown suede. A meerschaum too fresh-smelling to have known any use peeked from his breast pocket. I sidled into the group, and he acknowledged me immediately.

"DeVille! Good to see you!" He planted his hand firmly on my shoulder. With the contact, a new flavor coursed through me: a sweet white wine of contentment, but somewhat watery. It was a moment before I returned his greeting. He drew me into the center of the group. I wondered if he was drunk, though he didn't smell like it. "DeVille has been quite an inspiration to me. Even though the literary establishment hasn't quite grasped the merit of my work, DeVille sees what I'm trying to do. He's a friend of Fitzgerald's, you know."

I saw then what he was about. The role of the starving author was much more glamorous than that of the mousey bookkeeper masquerading as a hotel magnate. Here was a part he could play without fear of unmasking. He would no longer be expected to dress expensively, nor to pick up the tab, and if he should be discovered in his tiny cubicle at the Lakeshore Hotel, he could put it down to gathering material for a book. This accounted for the watery flavor of his desire: he no longer ached to be accepted into this crowd, because he had found his own way inside. While I was disappointed, I could not help admiring him for it.

The Watsonsons started the dancing. Muriel Watsonson was past forty, but dressed in the flapper style favored by women half her age. Yard-long ropes of pearls slapped her rounded belly as she danced, and the gray strands in her chestnut hair picked up the light. She moved well. Her husband was more awkward, as men often are, his skinny frame jiggling like a marionette, always a step or two behind his wife. MacKenzie looked over his shoulder at them and smiled. "Quite an image, wouldn't you say? Might find its way into one of my stories." He leaned past me to tap my young escort on the arm. "Care to dance?"

I knew her need to be seen with the most successful man at any function would keep her from spending any length of time with him, but she did accept the offer to dance. MacKenzie draped an overly familiar arm around her and steered her to the dance floor. He whispered something in her ear. She tipped her head back and laughed long and loud. I knew her need. There was no excuse for the sudden stab of jealousy I felt. None.

My senses did not fail me. She danced several dances with young MacKenzie, but she left the party with me. He was unfazed. When she returned to my arm and we said our goodbyes, he was already on the dance floor with another young woman of similar type. He waved a short goodbye to me over her bobbing platinum-blond head. The taste from him: nothing.

There was nothing to do for it but bring Fitzgerald into the picture. He had little use for the land beyond New York, so it would be difficult to get him to come here, but if anyone could manage it, it was certainly I. I set about the project immediately.

* * *

The Watsonson Award was too new to be prestigious, but

it made up for the lack of stature by being lucrative. I arranged for Fitzgerald to win, of course. The amount of the prize made it worth his while to come accept it. After the ceremony, there would be a party in his honor at the Watsonsons' home north of the city. I suggested to Muriel Watson that our rising young literary star, Jonathan MacKenzie, should attend both the ceremony and the party. She took the suggestion to heart, and seated MacKenzie next to Zelda at the ceremony. I was seated somewhat further away. I chose to see it as a chance to be subtle in my influence.

Everything about Zelda would have been perfect, if not for the deepening circles under her eyes, the price of too much drink and too little rest. MacKenzie ignored her imperfection, and leaned very close to speak with her. Her husband shot a cautionary look at them. She waved him away, but MacKenzie obediently slid back a few inches. In response, Zelda stroked the young man's hand, her touch lingering. He drew his fingers reluctantly away and poured her another glass of wine.

Zelda and MacKenzie were the most interesting part of the award ceremony, the bulk of it being tedious speeches by rich illiterates. Fitzgerald anesthetized himself to the painful boredom with drink. Still, he stood for his acceptance speech as straight-backed as the chair he was rising from and walked with easy grace to the lectern. He promised to keep his remarks brief, then did so: he simply thanked the people who had given him this award, thanked the Watsonsons for funding it, and ended, all the while managing to keep the boredom out of his voice, if not off his face.

If the Watsonsons were at a loss about how to host a successful awards ceremony, they were certainly in their element hosting the party afterward. The Watsonson property included a broad green expanse that faded into beige and then gray-blue as the grass became sand and the sand merged with the lake. Peering out across the water, one saw nothing but an occasional sailboat bobbing in the late afternoon sun, no lantern across the way, marking the home of a lover. (I've always thought that part of the novel was a brilliant invention of mine.) There were, though, paper lanterns strung throughout the Watsonson property, dangling from tree branches or hung from ribbons, rocking like buoys in the lake breeze. I had waved away the clouds that threatened the event; it was the least I could do. Beneath them, the lawn was dotted with tables, laden with artful arrays of food and drink, each table attended by one of that starched black-and-white species of servant who were always expressionless, whether the guests behaved with kindness, cruelty or indifference. Seldom did anyone—other than myself, of course—suspect the degree of observation and depth of feeling these creatures were capable of.

The fishy odor of the lake was curiously absent here, as if by sheer force of money the Watsonsons could wash it away. The air was instead fresh and clear, free as well of the city smells of industry on which many of the guests' fortunes were founded. Those guests numbered in the hundreds, the rumble of their collective conversation threatening to drown out the music of a full orchestra sit-

uated uncomfortably on the brick patio at the rear of the mansion. The first violinist's chair shifted on the uneven paving whenever he worked his bow forcefully. I could feel his consternation at having to play under such circumstances, at belonging to the sort of orchestra that played backyard functions. The tap of his chair as he leaned it back into position formed an unexpected complement to the work of the percussion section.

Scott and Zelda were at the center of attention always, as they were intended to be, and as they needed to be. Scott kept his chin tilted upward in disdain, but I knew that he secretly enjoyed the absence of competition for the spotlight here. And even so, I could taste his sense of unworthiness, as fresh and crisp as ever.

MacKenzie hovered at the outskirts of their group, lacking the nerve to attach himself to Fitzgerald. Scott favored him with a word now and then, and Zelda winked and flirted periodically. I drifted over to join them.

"Congratulations, Scott," I said. He accepted warmly, but I could see in his eyes that he knew I could see through him, and the knowledge reminded him to doubt his abilities. He shouted for another drink. The one in his hand was barely begun; he downed it in a gulp when the new one arrived.

"Have you met Jonathan MacKenzie yet?" I asked him. "You remember . . . I gave you a couple of his stories to read. Everyone here has been talking about him." I confirmed out of the corner of my eye that MacKenzie had heard me. He took a small step closer, but remained out of Fitzgerald's line of sight.

Muriel Watsonson slid an arm through Fitzgerald's. "He's quite brilliant, you know." She didn't know; it was well known that Muriel hadn't read anything but invitations since enrolling in finishing school.

Another young man, about MacKenzie's age but with the look of one born to the country club, piped up with the affected accent so frequently found among those who wish they had been educated abroad. "MacKenzie will be the next Fitzgerald!" He laughed. A few joined in, half-heartedly.

Fitzgerald's features darkened and his mouth turned down. "You compare me with the likes of him?" His voice rose into an unflattering whine. "At my absolute worst, I could never be so awful as all that! And at his best, he'll never be more than a hack. He'll have to work to become that!" He drained his drink and slammed the glass onto the nearest table. It jumped with the impact.

MacKenzie looked stricken. He took a few ragged steps backward, to make his escape. His pain was palpable, even to those without my senses, but not to the insipid fellow with the affected accent. "MacKenzie!" he shouted, gesturing at the retreating author. "Come defend yourself!"

Fitzgerald turned awkwardly—the drink finally showing its effect, I think—to face MacKenzie. "You're the one! Do the profession a favor and leave it." He said it loudly enough that lemminglike faces throughout the yard turned. The nodding of agreement spread like a rumor.

I watched MacKenzie flee. He made no pretense about it; he just turned and ran. His receding hurt washed over me like a wave front. I paused to savor it, but was inter-

rupted by Fitzgerald grabbing my arm, digging his fingers into it so hard the silk of my shirt almost became one with my skin. He hissed into my ear: "That's not what they think of me, is it? They don't really think that MacKenzie's stuff is like mine. I'm not that bad, am I?"

I smiled. "Relax, Scott. What do they know?" I pried his fingers loose from my arm. "Have another drink. Enjoy yourself." I savored the sweet aroma of his self-doubt as I sauntered away.

* * *

I didn't see MacKenzie at any of the fashionable functions for several months. I had expected his shame to keep him away, but not for so long. I feared I had done too much, that his desire had been so crushed that I would never again taste it. So I sought him out. I had to know for sure.

He wasn't in his office at the hotel when I presented myself there. I asked at the front desk, where a neat man with a carefully waxed mustache told me MacKenzie had gone to lunch. "With a friend," he added, with a knowing raise of the eyebrows.

I seated myself in the lobby to await his return. I had no warning when he did: the sweet flavor that usually announced him was absent. In its place was a level of confidence I had never seen in the man. He was accompanied by a young woman with a mop of reddish-brown curls and too much lipstick coloring a too wide mouth, currently forming a grin. She looked familiar.

When I rose to greet MacKenzie, he smiled. Not the welcoming smile I was used to. This smile had something else to it, something . . . perhaps predatory. The girl's smile lapsed into expressionlessness, and I remembered where I knew her from: she was a servant from one or another of the fashionable homes. Hardly the sort of girl I would expect MacKenzie to aspire to, but I suppose one takes one's pleasure where one can.

"DeVille, I have something I just have to show you," he said, taking my arm and guiding me into his cubbyhole of an office. His grip was gentle but sure. The girl trailed behind, the slap of her shoes on the carpet a reminder of her presence.

He yanked open a creaking drawer of the desk and hauled out a pile of paper four inches thick, held together with cord. He passed it over to me. "It's a collection of my stories. Which I've found a publisher for," I looked down at the bundle of carbon copies in my hands. "I'd like you to read them. Especially the first story." He exchanged a knowing look with the young woman. "Landy here helped with the research on that one." I could taste his triumph. It was a flavor I didn't enjoy.

I began to read:

"The night I met DeVille it was raining. He stood tall—or so it seemed, in fact he was no taller than I—and steady, as if possessed with the divine certainty that any portion of the torrent that came his way would roll off, leaving him utterly untouched. But his certainty was not divine; it was something quite the opposite. I would come to know who and what he was and I would destroy him."

He could hardly destroy me. But the taste he brought to my mouth at that moment was vile, putrid. I spat it out like a bad piece of fish. I was forced to excuse myself hastily. Outside his office, I sought the flavor of others, occupants and visitors in that hotel and then in the street. But the taste would not leave me, it hung on me like smoke, and I could tell that others could sense it too, by the way they shied away, and looked after me as I wandered the streets, seeking once again that perfect flavor. But my taste was off, polluted. It was a long time before I regained my appetite. ♦

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Kim Mohan, Editor

Chambered Nautilus

Elisabeth Vonarburg

I

When she realized that this time she couldn't leave, the Voyager decided to keep a diary.

Only one sentence, and already a baffler, she said to herself with some irony. In fact, when she realized she couldn't leave, she was stupefied, furious, terrified. It was when she'd accepted the idea of never leaving that she began keeping a diary.

Or else the thought crossed her mind when she went back to the village feeling troubled, discouraged and listless, when her Total Recall accessed her first awakening on the beach. The thought came hesitantly, tinged with amusement. A diary. What is a diary if not an imperfect, distorted memory, as proven by the first sentence she wrote in it? The idea of a diary for a Voyager with free access to Total Recall and trained to assemble and integrate countless data—yes, it *was* rather funny. Humor is the politeness of despair, as someone once said (she doesn't want to know who or in what universe). The idea was doubtless a final twitch of despair in the face of certainty, the final admission that she would never leave this particu-



Illustration by Guy Fierro

lar Earth, this particular universe where the ever unpredictable laws of her Voyages had cast her ashore.

The shifting, finely granulated texture of the sand, the intensity and slant of the sun's rays, the rhythmic murmur of waves lapping, the slightly saline humidity. . . . Dozens of other facts recorded by her sensor implants (atmospheric pressure, exact composition of the air), enlarging her perceptions before she even opens her eyes, tell her she is beside the sea in the northern hemisphere, and that it is late afternoon on Earth. On one Earth.

In the eternal present of Total Recall, there is almost no causal delay between data recorded by the Voyager's body and the conclusions drawn from them by her consciousness. Recall, whether Total or not, isn't linear. The Centers on some planets have perfected complex machines capable of directly recording the electric impulses corresponding to memory engrams. Voyagers can skip the interminable recital of their travels. Yet other machines translate and catalogue the data for the Archives. She, however, has always liked to recount her Voyages aloud. Some atavistic impulse, no doubt. Tell the story of her Voyages to someone. As they have been lived, not as they've been recorded in her brain and body. Also, to avoid accessing Total Recall except when necessary. It has always seemed to her that the *telling* gives these Voyages an extra edge of reality. Isn't writing a diary the equivalent, after all? She would be telling the story of this last Voyage (no longer a Voyage now that she could never leave), this passage that should have been a stopover and is to become her life.

She kept her eyes closed for a moment, letting all her other senses describe the scene: a long, sandy beach curving gently around a calm bay; behind her, the fringe of a fairly dense forest, with trees interspersed with hard blocks, too regular in their irregularity not to be buildings. And, fading away along the length of sand and water, bouncing off the forest and plotting the contours of the hard blocks, human voices, the voices of children playing. One of *those* Earths.

Not Earths like the one she'd left on her first Voyage, twenty years ago—Earths where in recent years she sometimes awoke directly in a Center, in the Voyagers' capsule, in the core of the Bridge's sphere. Where often, on opening her eyes, she found an Egon bending over her, an old Egon, moved to see her, but at peace. (Just as she had delivered herself from him in the course of manifold encounters in manifold universes, so he, in his way, had delivered himself from her. Now he could hold out a hand to help her out of the capsule and smile as he said her name: "Talitha.") Sometimes—and it happened more and more often—there was no Egon in these Centers. Egon was no more; Egon was dead.

She felt no sadness: he was alive somewhere else in other universes. It must surely be a sign. The Voyage takes Voyagers into universes that secretly correspond to their desires, and therefore the progressive fading and disappearance of Egons must mark the end of a phase for her. (After more than twenty years! Were one's inner tides so slow?) A sign that perhaps she was approaching the moment where Voyagers control the Voyage, go where they decide to go, not where their inner voices propel them.

They can only move among universes at will when these voices can be recognized and interpreted. A sign, the sign that soon she might be able to direct her Voyages, venture onto the most distant branches of the human universe-tree, and at long last leap onto another tree, go truly Elsewhere.

She had consulted the Archives in all the Centers she'd passed through, combed the libraries and the most advanced data on local science or the most ancient memories of tradition. No one, not ever, had made contact with a nonhuman universe. Oh, there were varying external details (diverse morphologies covered with fur, scales, or even a carapace), but the basic form remained upright and biped. Given these variants, their natural habitats, and the resulting mentalities and societies, the possible combinations were immense but not infinite. The universe that contained all possible variants of human history was certainly just one among many. And it was the Others that she longed for.

Had some Voyager in some universe made the leap, having mastered the Voyage? Impossible to know, of course. She herself had only Voyaged in a few hundred universes out of billions or trillions. . . . Well, it didn't matter: what she sought was a different universe-tree, another universe, the Other universe, truly and absolutely different. She didn't really know what motivated her. (She supposed this was why she hadn't yet found it). Was it *fame*? Curiosity? But she'd set aside those false motives long ago. No, it was something deeper, more obscure. This idea of her goal had only come to her bit by bit. In the beginning she had wanted to become a Voyager the way some people want to die. But—with Egon—she had learned to want to live, even if she was still fleeing when she left the first time. Egon. For years she hadn't stopped fleeing, or seeking, or finding him. At last, though, she'd understood, had accepted the inevitable and freed herself. All those years, all those universes behind her. . . . She could feel them drifting away. The end of one phase and the start of another? But so nebulous, so uncertain. . . .

Personal, subjective time takes on another dimension during the Voyage, in the leap from one universe to another, from one historic time to another, sometimes vastly different. But she'd kept count: in the last five years there'd been a dozen Voyages with the same pattern. About one time in three, she would find herself in a Center on an Earth identical to her own. She would leave immediately, not bothering to explore the variants, for they were often so minimal that it would take years and years to discover them. Another time in three, she would find herself on a planet not Earth, but always terrestrial enough despite variants to make it clear this was not the desired Other Universe.

That small planet on the outer edge of its galaxy, for example, perched on the verge of an intergalactic void—a vast black space where no star shone, where the most powerful telescopes could only discern the distant light of other galaxies as patches where the dark was slightly less profound. She stayed on this planet for six months, motivated by a vague hope. But no one ever crossed the void to bring news of other lives. She stayed to watch the night skies gradually losing their stars as the planet slipped

toward the part of its orbit bordering on the void. That season of deep and total nights corresponded to springtime in the southern hemisphere, where the equivalent of the Bridge was located. Spring, the renewal of life: the inhabitants of Shingen associated them with blackness, whereas she perceived the blackness as a heavy, terrifying lid. The Shingen fantasies—their myths, religions, and legends—stubbornly survived and were preserved as a precious heritage, peopling the shadows with beings of black light, guardians of a domain where, once a year, all the colors of the world came to renew themselves. And the Shingens had a very wide vocabulary for describing colors, especially black, which for them was the most mysterious and rich of shades. “Was.” Is. Why speak of them in the past tense? Their universe still exists, and so does their planet, perched on the edge of its stellar abyss.

There had also been that planet where life was only possible within a thin zone suspended between the boiling pressure of the surface and the suffocating void of gigantic mountaintops. Hanging between two mortal hells, life still evolved, tenacious and rich in dreams. The Bridge was not called by that name, and had been developed to explore the torrid depths of the surface. As often happened, its inventors had no idea it could be used to Voyage through universes, and their attempts after she’d come had failed. Perhaps they’d had no need to Voyage. They’d only begun to explore their planet, and, in itself, it was three universes.

There had been. Yes, this was how the memory of this diary differed from Total Recall—in this past tense that insisted on coming back. She had briefly visited these planets, these universes, and would never go back. Her passage emphasized their temporality. *There had been*, therefore, this planet where two human races cohabited, one very ancient, and the other on the edge of humanity, over which the first watched with discreet tenderness, not keeping itself hidden, with no attempt to dominate, with no fear or bitterness. The name of the first race, *K’tu’inié’go*, literally meant “those who come before the beginning,” which signified “the apprentices,” or “the unfinished.” Only the second race, which had barely begun to explore the fringes of language, was called “human.” A system of complex myths recorded these names, to which the *K’tu’inié’go* scholars, and particularly the biologists, gave another meaning. But they would smile at her as they explained the scientific basis for relations between the two races, as though these explanations were merely another story, mainly pleasing for its novelty and ingenuity. For them, all truths were always multiple. She had been astonished that, with such a world vision, this first people had been able to develop science to a state advanced enough to include the equivalent of a Bridge. They used it to treat congenital cellular degeneration, which could only be slowed down in the suspended animation of deep cold, around absolute zero.

And one Voyage in three led her to another Earth, *this* Earth, with continents gradually submerged, dikes anxiously watched over by their guardians, cliffs nibbled away by the waves, and the soft, moist air of a warming planet on which the polar icecaps are inexorably melting. She had

recognized it even before opening her eyes. This was the fourth time her sensors had recorded this *gestalt* perception in her Total Recall. When she did open her eyes to find the beach with its still muted colors, she asked herself yet again whether, through some new and bizarre trick of her Voyages, this mightn’t be the same planet at different moments in its evolution.

Total Recall, so clear, so immediate, the past becomes the present again, just for the asking. The children aren’t far from the spot where she has materialized. She knows, having read about it in many Archives and witnessed it once herself, that a Voyager appears almost instantaneously, almost in the blink of an eye. Perhaps the children haven’t seen her appear. The awakening takes longer, and plenty of Voyagers have found themselves in sticky situations, although never fatal—not according to the Archives consulted by her, at any rate. Could suicidal Voyagers propel themselves into a universe that would immediately kill them? But you can’t train to become a Voyager and remain suicidal, as she well knows.

Have n’t the children noticed the woman sleeping naked on their beach? She walks in their direction, watching them and scanning the landscape. The beach is well kept, with heaps of driftwood and kelp neatly arranged at the far end beside the pilings of a wharf. The forest seems well tended, too. Great umbrella pines mingle with more tropical species, growing thickly enough to create a wall of foliage and branches above the regularly spaced trunks and the cleared forest floor. The half-hidden buildings are ruins, but their contours and materials are still recognizable—the architecture was ultramodern on the last Earth of this type that she’d visited. The children’s village lies beyond the wharf, in a notch cut out of the forest.

The children continue playing at the edge of the waves. Their slender bodies are of curiously different shades, the palest seeming to shimmer in the sunlight. It is hard to tell girls from boys at first glance. The silhouettes of their supple bodies flow smoothly from head to shoulders to hips to legs, ending in fact that are subtly disproportionate and, like their overly large, flat hands, slightly . . . webbed. A semiaquatic humanity—she’s never encountered it on an Earth like this one. The children don’t turn their eyes away when she looks at them. They smile rather shyly and go on with their game. She can tell what it is from their movements. They are tossing a flat, round marker and hopping to retrieve it. Rows of shells mark segments in the smooth, wet sand. But it isn’t the hopscotch grid of her childhood (so near, so far, dozens of universes away), or those she’s occasionally come upon since then. Those were either rectangular or arranged in a double cross. This one is a spiral with ten sections that diminish toward the center, ending in a space just big enough for a child’s foot. Beneath it, somewhat scuffed by the feet of the players, is the whorl of an inverse spiral that grows bigger toward the center.

She sits on the sand again near a pile of empty shells. A great sense of peace fills her, as is so often the case when she awakes. The sun sinks behind the sea, leaving a sky dotted with small clouds slowly sculpted by a distant wind, meticulous yet shifting hieroglyphs, their silvery outlines

bright at first, then fading to nothing. The ebbing surf breaks softly but steadily on the sand to a continuo of rustling trees and the gentle, rhythmic sing-song of the children at their game. A new coolness touches her skin, and night seems to well up from the sea as it fades from pink to gray, blotting out the line where sea meets sky. All this, simultaneously perceived by her senses (and not linearly as it is now being recorded by these words), resembles the vibrato of an ultimate chord before . . . before what, if ultimate? Still, that is what she feels at the time, a Voyager in transit, present yet altogether detached, a suspension, a waiting.

She is waiting for someone to speak. But the someone sits down beside her in silence, watches the children as they continue their game, takes a shell from the pile—the smooth green-white palette of an oyster—and strokes it with a finger. A long finger, joined to the others by a translucent membrane. The light skin, vaguely pink in the afterglow of the sun, is covered in fine, iridescent scales; the arm, like the whole body, is wet and smells of the sea. The head, with its cap of fair, water-smoothed hair, pivots slowly to reveal a heart-shaped face, vaguely Asiatic, with large, gray-green eyes, heavy lids slanting toward the temples, a flat nose, and a small mouth with full, curved lips. The someone is a naked woman, age impossible to tell, who has just come out of the water and is looking at her, unsmiling but not unfriendly. They stare at one another for a long moment. Then the woman gets up, takes her by the hand, and leads her to the village, followed by the children.

Talitha accepts the simple garments proffered by the villagers. After a somewhat uncertain silence, the familiar ritual begins. The large, dusky woman who appears to speak for the villagers places a hand on her heart and says, "Ao palli kedia"—syllables that may be her name. Talitha's trained mind immediately begins to establish correlations between the stressed syllables and pronunciation of this language with those encountered on the three other, similar planets. Perhaps the syllables mean "I am Palli Kedia" or "I am a kedia" or "a palli" or "the village chief." Faithful to the ritual, however, Talitha in turn places a hand on her heart and says her own name clearly. The villagers murmur softly. Is it surprise? Appreciation? The woman from the sea touches Talitha's arm and smiles—perhaps because she is moved or amused or both. Putting her other hand on her naked breast (a flowerlike hand, the membranes stretched between the spreading fingers), she speaks what must be her name, accentuating the difference: "Ao Tlitha."

Talitha has already met herself in other universes. Not very often—that isn't what she was hoping to find when she became a Voyager. (And, quite soon, she even stopped wanting to meet the Talitha who lived happily with an Egon. Of course they exist somewhere, all the facets of this story exist somewhere, but she has finally passed beyond the stage where she thinks of it as "our story." It is the story of every Talitha and every Egon in their respective universes, as those she's met have made her fully realize. Her own story is something else, something she hasn't yet shaped.) And so she merely smiles, noting the similarity between her name and the name of the woman from the sea. She has no desire to find out more about this

contingent variant of herself, however exotic. She turns toward "Palli Kedia," resolved to do what every Voyager does upon arrival: learn the local language.

Palli Kedia seems reluctant to talk, once they have exchanged names. Talitha shows her wish to communicate, pointing to the objects around them and saying all the names given them on other Submerged Earths. Palli Kedia may be reluctant to talk, but she is quite ready to communicate. The language is based on a complex sign system assisted occasionally by a few words, sometimes by a mere sound.

There are Voyagers who never tire of the infinite forms of humanity encountered. They are the ones who feed the Archives in the Centers, to which they travel only to leave again. Talitha isn't one of these explorers. What struck her very soon in her Voyages were the recurrent patterns, the resemblances, the repetitions. She seeks something else, something totally other, unimaginable, *amazing*.

She leaves the village next morning. If this Earth resembles the other three fairly closely, the political and scientific centers will be in the southeast. Once again she'll probably have to travel to the extreme south of the continent, where the capital stands on a cliff (in one case entirely artificial), a city built as a challenge to the sea and its inevitable encroachment. On the first Submerged Earth this was a true calamity—a natural disaster. On the others, humans had played a considerable part in the general warming of their planet. Changes came with great speed, made worse by the accompanying recurrence of violent seismic activity. On an overpopulated Earth, and in societies that were all the more fragile because of their complex technologies, these upheavals were catastrophic. The long-term consequences decimated the population on the third Earth, and the human race was slowly becoming extinct. She had taken nearly three years to find a group of scientists either dynamic or stoic enough to continue doing research, and to convince them to develop the machine that one of them was tinkering with for the sake of amusement—a machine that, unknown to him, was an embryo Bridge. Three years! Never had she stayed so long in one place, even in the universe where she had at last made her peace with Egon. It was also the first time she'd actually had to help build a Bridge. She left that planet, that universe, with a brief question in her mind: now that a Bridge existed, Voyagers would surely come, and others would leave by it. But it was probably already too late to change the fate of that dying human race. In any case, she was no missionary, and she knew perfectly well she hadn't given that Earth a Bridge in order to fulfill the secret plan of some hidden divinity, her goal was to leave.

Now, as she travels over almost vanished roads, through ruined towns and landscapes still bearing the scars of ancient devastation, she soon feels a growing anxiety. Does she detect an increasingly recurrent pattern here? She'd found it more and more difficult to leave the preceding Submerged Earths. This one seems to have regressed even further in the same direction as the last. Not much is known about how the Voyage works, apart from the physical functioning of the Bridge itself up to the moment when the anesthetized body is cooled to almost absolute zero

and disappears from the capsule. But the law, the only sure law, is that the Bridge always provides access to universes that you can *leave*, one where a Bridge exists (even if not called that), or where it is technologically possible for the Voyager to have one built. There is nothing surprising in this, because it is not the Bridge that propels Voyagers into the various universes, but the Voyagers themselves, their psychic, or as believers say, their Matrix. Voyagers may have sent themselves into universes without any means of escape, because they desired it either consciously or unconsciously. It is a statistical certainty, but materially unverifiable, since such Voyagers have never returned to the Centers to confide their experiences to the Archives. She knows she doesn't yearn for that kind of universe; that means there must be a Bridge on this planet or the possibility of one or its equivalent.

After two weeks of solitary walking, her fears are allayed. She comes to a small city where the remaining inhabitants speak a language closely resembling the Euskade she'd learned on the second Submerged Earth. Without too much difficulty, they agree to provide her with a small automotive vehicle in fairly good shape. The roads improve toward the southeast, they tell her, and she'll have no trouble getting to the big city she's looking for. In the other universes it was called Périndéra, Neva de Rel, Torre molines. In the village by the sea they called it Aomanukera. Here it is called Baiblanca.

II

The city is like its predecessors, a constant factor from one of these universes to another, revealing the stubborn resolve of the city's creators to fashion a place at once functional, comfortable, and esthetically pleasing. A rather too carefully orchestrated casualness seems to have governed its development. This Baiblanca possesses the same general characteristics and layout as its doubles, with one notable exception: it is almost totally deserted. The parks and gardens have run wild and are invading the streets and squares, a green tide attacking monuments and buildings. She walks the length of the Promenade, the name here for the long, tree-lined esplanade that follows the curve of the cliff-top—or what had once been a cliff-top. At high tide the water washes over the flagstones, swirling around the benches and trees in small, patient eddies. (There is no violence in the sea; it knows it has won.) The weather is mild and the sunlight has a pearly quality from the permanent haze masking the sky. A few people in light boots stroll along the Promenade, and a few children too, barefoot and too young to be either blasé or afraid, laughing with sacrilegious delight at seeing water where it shouldn't be. She contemplates the Promenade's sweep, subtly distorted by the thin layer of water, and already she knows, senses, what the still-functional data hanks will tell her: there is no Bridge, nor the equivalent, nor the possibility of a Bridge in Baiblanca.

She doesn't give up at once, she will not, cannot believe it. She consults the data banks, crisscrosses the city interrogating the inhabitants—a nucleus of several thousand diarchs clustered in the quarter between the Arts

Palace, the Government Complex, and the fortress-hill of the Institute. Whatever its names elsewhere—names meaning "academy" or "university"—the Institute is the real seat of power. Here she finds interested listeners, minds still curious, and a regretful willingness: yes, they understand very well the principle of the machine she describes, and they even dig through the Institute's memory banks to show her another version, equally workable. But to build such a machine . . .

The problem isn't so much to build it as to reconstitute the technology necessary for making the required materials. Baiblanca has passed the critical point beyond which this is impossible.

She won't, can't believe it. Surely Baiblanca isn't the only large metropolis still in existence! People sigh and pull long faces, but they give her names and maps, and at last supply her with a precious, small airborne vehicle. They wish her good luck, but they are right to be skeptical. After six months, she has to accept the evidence: no one, nowhere, is capable of helping her build a Bridge. If one exists on this Earth, it has been forgotten and all trace of it lost. In a flash, she sees herself as an old Voyager, transformed into an obdurate explorer, a detective, interminably ruffling through tattered documents, following dubious trails in the heart of jungles and ruins, tirelessly interrogating human survivors who have reverted to a primitive state. No. Not her. Another Talitha in another universe, maybe, but not her. She won't chase a phantom for the rest of her life, the mirage of a nonexistent Bridge; she won't pay such a crazy price to avoid despair.

She does despair, although she won't admit it, returning to Baiblanca through what is left of the continent called Numéide, Eslam, or Basilisso in other worlds, but Africa in this one. She journeys part of the way on the back of a *dromedary*, an animal no more and no less strange than others in other universes—hump-backed, a long-legged quadruped, its long, arched neck resembling a ship's prow, rolling like a dinghy as it walks. "Ship of the desert," its human owners call it. The name has stuck, despite the fact that the desert is finally disappearing beneath the Sahara Sea, which linked up long ago with the other sea—a sea with no special name anymore, because it is the same everywhere, the same inexorable invader, "the sea." She goes back to Baiblanca, leaving the small airborne vehicle to rust away in the shallow water where she made a forced landing. The Institute scholars are certainly not pleased, but they pity her. They offer her their hospitality, but she feels restless, preferring to explore the city, camping wherever she can, striding unceasingly through the familiar yet strange places (in a city where she had spent three years of her life, not so very long ago, in another universe). She catalogues resemblances and differences, but as usual she notices the resemblances most. Does she actually see them? She records, she moves, tries to tire herself out on rambles, so that she will fall into a dreamless sleep at night. She ignores the city's dangers, the wild animals, the solitary and sometimes aggressive humans; these don't compare with the real terror, the instant of inattention when the noise of all this motion fades, and the inner voice is heard again.

I cannot leave, there is no Bridge, I am stuck here!

Condemned to live and die here, on this drowning Earth. Is it possible? Is all she knows or thinks she knows about the Bridge and the Voyage false? *The Bridge takes you where, consciously or unconsciously, you wish to go, until you have mastered the Voyage, until you know yourself. Then you can go where you please, or return.* What she knows or thinks she knows of herself—is that also false? After twenty years of Voyaging, is she unable to understand why she has propelled herself onto this dead-end planet? She is stupefied, furious—and scared to death. So she goes off to yet another quarter of the city, she probes the occasional data banks that still function, learning in bits and pieces the story of this world, this society, this city, not really caring what her Total Recall is recording. The crucial thing is to fill the threatening silence with voices and images, to prevent the horrifying litany from welling up. *I cannot leave, there is no Bridge, I am stuck here!*

When at last she gives up, she returns to the Institute and settles into one of the residential wings of the fortress-campus. Naturally, some of the Institute members ask her to record her experiences in other universes for the central Infolibrary. There are no machines for abridging the process, but it doesn't matter—telling it helps pass the time. She accesses her Total Recall and listens to it speak. Weeks pass in the morning she talks, in the afternoon she answers questions raised by her accounts. After that, she aimlessly digs for facts in the Infolibrary or wanders through the uninhabited triangle of Baiblanca, taking a detour to the Promenade or the Colihri Park. The park is named after tiny, colorful birds, living jewels that gather nectar from the flowers beneath a huge, transparent cupola in the middle of the main lawn. But it isn't the birds that fascinate her; it's the statues. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, everywhere—the bodies of men and women, sometimes in graceful poses, sometimes in stances so natural as to seem strange. It was dusk when she first entered the park, and she thought that the whole city had congregated there. Figures stood, sat, lay on the ground, rested against trees, even *in* trees. And then she realized that all these people were completely naked and motionless. As she came closer, she saw that they were made of stone, or something minerallike. All of them statues, all of them highly individualized. They had worn clothing once, but it had gradually rotted away. (The Infolibrary provided her with curious pictures of this gradual divestment, showing multitudes of statues with garments in varying stages of disintegration.) But the statues themselves were made of a material impervious to salt air, and yet so delicate in texture, porous, like a honeycomb . . . like pumice stone. As she touched it, she had a momentary vision of the park finally submerged beneath the sea, and the statues gradually floating off their benches, or trees, or lawns, drifting with the tides. In reality, however, the stone was very solid, very heavy. The statues would remain anchored to the sea-hot-ton in the park, and moonfish would replace the tiny birds.

"Oh, the *benemados*," says Caetanes, referring to the statues.

The old biologist's tone catches her interest. It is an intricate mixture of amused disdain and an undercurrent of

resentment (of disgust, of fear?). He says no more, and the Infolibrary is also curiously laconic on the subject. Six hundred years earlier, during the brief period when all was still in a state of equilibrium, when the Earth's civilization had not yet begun to topple toward extinction, scientists and technicians had perfected an artificial organic material with complex properties, capable of imitating life. The artifacts created by biosculptors out of this material had a certain amount of independence that diminished with age—and they aged rapidly. Generally, after about a dozen years, their gradually slowing metabolism produced complete mineralization. For some unfathomable reason, it became fashionable at one point for biosculptors to give their creations a motor tropism that directed them to Colihri Park as life was ending. And there they stopped forever.

The history of biosculpture covers barely a hundred and fifty years. The sources of this science—this art—are obscure. Its origins seem to have been in more or less secret government research immediately after the so-called "Catastrophe" period, the fifty or so years after the first Great Tides. The Infolibrary is very discreet on this point. Nevertheless, various signs clearly indicate to her trained mind that the data bank has been fixed and that the Institute itself has probably lent a hand in this. Old stories of a bygone day that seem to have left fairly conscious traces in the minds of the last survivors . . . She doesn't realize it at this moment, but after nearly a year the period of mourning has ended. Her old vitality has rekindled itself and she feels the need to act instead of letting the days slip by. This small mystery comes at just the right moment to distract her. It doesn't take long to solve: after six hundred years, the taboos have lost their potency, even among the heirs of the Institute.

Some biosculptors clearly improved their basic material, to the point where their creations couldn't be distinguished from real human beings. And some biosculptors actually decided that their creatures, their artifacts, were indeed human beings. And why not? They had improved the basic material so much that they eventually created beings that lived longer than normal humans, and above all, could procreate—something normal humans were doing less often and less well. The Institute had outlawed biosculpture, but it had neither the political power nor, in reality, the necessary conviction to enforce this. The artifacts proliferated. Now, only a few small communities of the original human race remain, and these have become rigid in their isolation. Over the centuries, often without knowing it, humans had mated with artifacts. Their half-breed descendants, the *benemados*, and the descendants of mating between artifacts themselves, are slowly, very slowly, repopulating the Earth. . . . This Earth isn't a dying planet, after all is said and done. It's recovering slowly, very slowly, from a near-fatal illness.

When she's finished putting together the pieces of the puzzle, she is astonished. How could she have thought this planet was dying? She has let herself be hypnotized by ruined cities and the traces of a once-powerful civilization that can still be seen everywhere. Above all, she hasn't really cared whether it was dying or not, since this planet was supposed to be merely a stage in her Voyages. And

when she realized she wasn't going to leave again . . . Now she understands both the cause of her illusion and the fact that the cause no longer exists. She suddenly thinks of the fishing village, of Tilitha who may be her double in this universe. Why not, why not? Going back to her starting point would be a gesture replete with satisfying irony—would it not respect the recurring structure of her latest Voyages? To go back to her starting point: a dead end, the circular motion of starting over. She sees things clearly, now (so easy in retrospect). All those Earths, identical to hers, had the same message as those other, falsely different planets: the end, immobility, death. The stellar desert in the springtime night of the Shingens, the certain extinction of some of the *K'tu'tinié'go* and of those ever more submerged Earths . . . Of course, there was also Manisché, the planet of fire and ice, its tenacious life balancing on a thread. The heirs of the *K'tu'tinié'go* would take up the torch once more, the starless Shingen night would be succeeded by the constellations of the summer sky. And here, the *bendemados* . . .

And just because she, Talitha, will live out her life on this particular Earth doesn't mean life itself is becoming extinct. Through the huge picture window of the reading room she has a view over the city to the sea, a dull gleam beneath the veiled sun. She can certainly make this sacrifice to her new but useless clairvoyance: since life goes on, at least life where it *is* going on, and not in condemned Baiblanca. Make one last little voyage, and for once (the first and last time) know where she is going.

III

February 20: Year One, after all I've decided to. I Really decide! I'm certainly taking a lot upon myself.

When she realized that this time she couldn't leave, the Voyager decided to keep a diary.

Only one sentence, and already a half-life.

February 23: Welcomed without fanfare by the village. They recognized me and greeted me by name, helped me settle into a small, quickly built hut on the edge of the village. They didn't say much—and always in sign language. I'll soon learn it. Easier to use the first person. I. Because *they* are observing *me*—an external perspective that has the effect of making me draw into myself, concentrate on myself, unlike my own perspective, which undoes me.

February 26: It seems they've decided to make an exception for me and talk a little, at least for long enough to teach me the sign language. Spoken language is too precious to be wasted in verbalizing the trivia of daily life. (A curious detail: in this language the verb "to talk" seems to have the same derivation as the verb "to voyage.") I'm learning very fast, of course, both the spoken and sign language. It's easy to establish correlations from the crumbs they let fall—after all, I was trained to do it. They seem surprised. Palli Kedia came in person to see how I was getting along. A supposedly fortuitous meeting. I was coming back from my morning walk on the shore. (How quickly one settles into a routine!) She greeted me, we talked

for a moment, and I continued on my way, conscious of having passed a test. And now?

March 6: Now it's Tilitha who's keeping an eye on me. Or so I suppose. Our meetings, always on the shore morning or evening, also seem purely accidental. Tilitha is always naked, often wet. Dolphins play in the waves while we talk. They come with her, go with her; she calls them "cousins." She and those like her, the arevags, visit the village regularly, but they don't live there. Their habitat is under water, in the forest of giant kelp covering the drowned cities. Tilitha is the sister of Palli Kedia. The two races can crossbreed. Among the arevags, one child in four—almost always a boy—turns out to be a *bendemado* and is given by the mother to the village. The same proportion of arevags is born in the village; they are always girls, and they return to the sea, as in Tilitha's case. Both are almost completely amphibious, with the *bendemados* able to remain under water for long periods, and the arevags able to stay in the open air for over a day without discomfort. Their respective capacities depend on the degree of crossbreeding—scientific details to be recorded in my Total Recall, not in this diary. What I see of this double race, what I experience, is the constant mixing, the opening of one to the other, and the impression that the water's edge isn't a frontier for these people but a door to be opened at will. The inverse of Baiblanca, in a way—Baiblanca on its inundated clifftop, Baiblanca where the tide is looked upon as an encroachment of one element on another, because each is conceived of as an opposite. Here, water and earth are clearly distinct, and the two races (despite their ability to crossbreed) are different, if only because the arevags are exclusively female; yet they are open to one another, for better or for worse. (There are quarrels, jealousies, and longings that cause a certain amount of strife, and life, particularly in mixed families, seems fairly agitated. Sign language may not be noisy, but it can be pretty vehement for all that. The other day I witnessed a public outburst that ended in blows and tears.)

By the by, as far as language goes, each race seems to have adopted the habits of the other. The arevags tend to speak aloud when they come to the village, and the villagers communicate with them by signs, as though they were under water. Both, however, have begun to observe a cautious silence toward me, the stranger. Probably they don't quite know what category of human to put me in: suddenly I appeared from nowhere on their beach, and I didn't stay with the original humans (referred to by them simply as "the last ones"). My talks with Tilitha have been fairly brief these last few days. I'm not even sure our meetings are part of a predetermined plan on the part of the two communities. Perhaps it's a purely personal initiative on her part, because of the similarity of our names. This seems to fascinate her. To start with, she didn't ask me where I came from; instead, she explained who *she* was and where she came from (thereby confirming my theories about the arevags). I tried to do the same, but without much confidence. How was I to make her understand the concept of the Bridge? I drew the universe-tree in the wet sand, showing the ramifications of its branching uni-

verses. She listened, nodding, her eyes shining. I wondered what she made of it. Then she asked, "How?" I tried to explain the Bridge, but my description of the machine only aroused a perplexed interest. She came alive, though, when I began to explain how the Voyage worked. The descent to absolute zero, the cold sleep, all motion stopped, and at the heart of this absolute immobility, absolute motion: the spirit, the Matrix, shooting forth, tearing the Voyager's body from its universe to propel it into the merry-go-round of similar universes. "Similar universes?" she echoed, visibly disconcerted. I described the universes where I had met Egons—and Talithas. She meditated this for a while but said nothing. Then, with a sharp fingertip, she drew a closed circle around the tree in the sand. (The arevags don't go defensively into the depths: they have sheathed claws.) In a few minutes she has grasped what has taken me five years to comprehend: the Voyage comes to an end one day; there is no truly other universe.

"I am Tilitha. You are Talitha," she added aloud, as if to conclude her statement.

That's how I translate it. What she said in her language was, "Ao Tilitha. Ao Talitha." *Ao*, the human pronoun of both arevags and *bendemados*, can't be translated otherwise. It's used to introduce oneself to strangers, or talk of oneself or others in important discussions—when it is felt the speaker is not the individual woman or man, but the person, a concept transcending gender. I asked her about the origin of this so-called human pronoun. It was a long story, Tilitha said with a smile, getting up. Hadn't we time? I asked. She shook her head. "Tomorrow." She slid into the water without leaving a nipple, and went to join her dolphins.

March 11: Of course, it's a lot more complicated than I thought. *Ao*, the human pronoun, implies active virtuality. There is another, *O*, related to passive virtuality. Tilitha explained this to me (or thought she was explaining it, while plunging me into even greater darkness) by recounting a legend. It was the story of creatures who attained the total human state in the real world. (Androgynes? Or beings capable of changing their sex at will? It wasn't clear.) These creatures went away from the Earth but left their seeds behind to divide and redive, spreading until their effectiveness has been completely lost. The only surviving traces are in language, among others this active-virtual pronoun. But what about the passive-virtual pronoun *O*? No, no, that pronoun came from before, said Tilitha by way of correction, as though it were obvious. Not obvious to me, though, as she realized; she decided to go back to the Flood for my edification, that is, to Creation.

The first woman is called Manu, and she has two mothers. The Uncreated Mother, Taike, whom she meets during her wanderings and who gives her Earth and Time—in other words, Death, without which no life is possible. And another, the Created Mother, who gives Manu the Sea and Life, and who is named Tilith (after whom girls are called Tilitha). Tilith entrusts Manu with a mission: find the land beneath the sea and the first arevags who have been lost in the limbo of eternity. (Are they immortal? Manu finds them, and in some obscure way—since the original arevags are all females, too—gives birth to the first *bendemados*.

Manu must be the third woman then, not the first, I said to Tilitha. Yes and no, she answered (with confidence, not with the hesitation such a reply would express if I had made it). Manu was the first real woman, Tilith was the first virtual woman. And Taike? Taike came from the world in an earlier state, not chaos, but "the mirror-world."

I pleaded for clarification, and Tilitha tried to supply it. In the mirror-world, the passive-virtual beings (*o iket*, she said) reproduced by union with their reflection. But one day, three of these beings had union among themselves, abandoning their reflections and creating Tilith, the first being who wasn't a copy. In this same momentum, the three reflections, left to themselves, fused to produce Taike, called "the Uncreated" because in a sense she gave birth to herself. But Taike was too heavy for the insubstantial material of the virtual world, she tore a great hole and fell through. Her fall created the Earth. Tilith was also too real for the virtual world. The reflections turned to water wherever she went, and all this water flowed with Tilith toward the tear and spilled onto the Earth. And Tilith's fall created the Sea. The meeting of Tilith and Taike gave birth to Manu in the real world created by both.

I asked Tilitha what happened to the beings of the virtual world once their reflections had spilled away, and her reply at last made it clear how she had been able to grasp my explanations about universes so readily. They still exist, she said. Without Tilith, the reflections grew again, and at this very moment Creation is reenacting itself in innumerable places and innumerable ways. The world in which we now live is merely a sort of local precipitation around the original seed created by Tilith and Taike. There are many others, elsewhere.

March 15: As usual, a morning walk along the shore. And as usual, on the smooth sand left by the tide, the children are drawing the spiral of their morning hopscotch, the one narrowing toward the center. This spiral retraces the adventures of Manu, and each segment must be approached in a certain way, accompanied by the little song I heard when I first awoke on this planet. It's a kind of dance, with the stances and the song complementing each other in recounting the adventures of the Third Mother, from her birth (first segment) to the birth of the first *bendemados*. The evening hopscotch tells of the creation of the world, the birth of Tilith and Taike in the mirror-world, their fall, and (in the last and largest segment) the birth of Manu.

The whole game is highly ritualistic and the song resembles the chanting of a psalm. The players sing the whole thing in unison, adding a verse at each segment. The player standing on a segment must stay perfectly still all this time, holding the required posture for that segment and the story, only picking up the marker on the last syllable of the verse. Once he has hopped onto the same segment as the marker, he closes his eyes. This gives the other players a chance to exchange a sign fixing the speed at which they will chant. It may catch the player unawares, especially if he hasn't a clear idea of where the marker was lying. He has to pick it up without opening his eyes. If he fumbles his first try or stumbles, then he has to wait until the next turn to try for the same segment. I'm a little sur-

prised at the age of the players, though, considering the kind of game it is. They range from five to fifteen years, of both sexes, arevags and *bendemados*—but fifteen is the cutoff mark. This is also the age when the young *bendemados* stop using speech as their main form of communication, and adopt the adult mode, three-quarters of which involves gestures.

I've been living in Terueli (the name of the village) for nearly a month now, and I'm still under observation. When I ask questions, people often reply with the head movement that means "tomorrow." Even Tilitha, whose open curiosity about me is an exception, often makes it clear that a particular question is premature. With the help of my Total Recall I can make all the correlations and hypotheses I like, but they're worthless if I can't verify them. (I'm forever noticing that the information in Total Recall isn't knowledge, like wisdom, knowledge isn't merely a matter of storing data.)

In any case, these people are not at all primitive, although they live simply. In a world where preceding civilizations have plundered most of the primary materials, they make very intelligent use of what can be salvaged from the waste still surrounding them. Not so much at Terueli, which is mainly a fishing village—but the *bendemados* of the interior trade regularly with the coastal communities and even with some cities where the original humans are on the point of extinction. They have very sensibly adapted their way of life to the possibilities in their changed environment. But how do they really see themselves? Do they know that arevags and *bendemados* were artificially created by the original humans only six hundred years ago? It's tempting to link Tilitha's myth with my findings in Baiblanca. . . . But then I remember the *K'tu thni'go* and their indulgent smile. Such a reductionist interpretation would still tell me nothing about how the myth nurtures their individual and collective lives. Tilitha had no hesitation about telling it: for her, it's a familiar story with no sense of secrecy or taboo. She even seemed to regard it with a sort of amused detachment. But how representative is she of her culture, I wonder? Physically, she's more of a *bendemado* than an arevag, and yet she's chosen to live under the water. And although she has a male companion in the village (and a female one beneath the sea, as is often the case), she has never had children, which is very unusual. It accentuates our resemblance. Some women Voyagers are compulsive about bearing a child in each of the universes where their desire takes them—something I could never understand. Or accept. And the ones to whom I sometimes talked never understood my quest for a totally different universe. But there was no acrimony in our disagreement: the Voyage is too personal, too solitary an adventure for us to judge each other. But they no doubt found what they were looking for, whereas I . . .

March 22: Was it a dream? If so, I certainly can't shake it off. It has some secret meaning that I want to—that I must—make clear to myself.

Yesterday was the spring equinox. The villagers had a festival. They cleaned and redecorated their boats and houses. Delicious smells wafted through the village all that

day and the day before, heralding the dishes for the coming feast. The young adults went out with the ebbing tide, and the boats came back with the rising tide, bearing the little *bendemados* born beneath the sea. These children will live in the village from now on. The little arevags born in the village will leave at the autumn equinox. There was dancing, music and singing competitions, and the two communities competed in trials of strength and skill on land and in the water. At nightfall we had the feast. I hadn't been officially invited, but then I've been welcomed with good will and friendliness at all festivities. I assumed an invitation was considered superfluous, since I was now sufficiently part of the village. As the night wore on, however, I became uncomfortable amid the increasingly erotic intimacy. All at once I felt terribly alone, and the black thoughts that had been temporarily pushed aside came flooding back. *I'm here forever, I'll never leave. . . .* I set about serious drinking, both amused and disgusted at my childish behavior. Disgust got the upper hand in the end, and I walked away from the merry-makers, not wishing to inflict my maudlin drunkenness on my hosts. I collapsed in the shadows of the beach, floating in the slow whirlpool of second-stage inebriation as I lay between the heaving beach and the reeling, star-studded sky. I closed my eyes and fell asleep. And dreamed. I think.

I am on the beach where the feast was held. All trace of the festivities has disappeared, leaving only villagers and arevags seated side by side, forming a continuous line in the shape of a spiral. At the heart of the spiral, motionless and with eyes closed, lies Pilkei, a fairly old bendemado. I've been tempted to think of him as the village priest, because people often consult him on a variety of problems. ("Oh, no," Tilitha said, "he's merely the father of a lot of children.") He doesn't move, nor do the arevags and bendemados, and yet something is moving. It's the song. It spirals slowly, swelling as each voice picks it up and adds a syllable. The song is a single word that lengthens as it passes from mouth to mouth . . . and suddenly begins to diminish, one syllable at a time, as it coils around the old man. I see it, I see it as though each syllable were a round box larger than the one before, growing until a threshold is reached, a limit beyond which the movement turns back on itself and each syllable folds into the preceding one until the word returns to its original state. Only to unfold once more, from beginning to end, and from end to beginning—and no, they aren't boxes but rings springing successively out of their predecessors and being swallowed up by them, and the rings are a word, the word of the universe: it governs the ebb and flow of the tides, the elliptic path of the planet around the sun, and the sun's trajectory in the embrace of the galaxy; while the galaxy, dancing in the universe, whips the same word passed back from sun to planet to tide, carried on the swirling winds and the curling buds, and from there into human bodies and jostling molecules of matter, minuscule galaxies of infinite coils. The spiral of sound furls and unfurls, and at the end of this eternity of motionless movement, no one is left at the center of the coil. Pilkei has disappeared.

I awoke in my hut—someone had carried me back. It

was past noon. I had a dreadful hangover and didn't get up. The villagers have better heads for their sparkling wine than I, and went about their daily business. In the evening one of Palli Kedia's sons brought me something to eat (leftovers from the feast will probably feed the village for several days). He was a tall, handsome boy named Lekin. The only sign of the arevag strain is his very light, vaguely iridescent skin. I made a joke of asking him if he'd brought me home last night. There was just the slightest hesitation, then he said "Til," sketching the sign for arevag. Tilitha had brought me back.

March 23: Pilki is no longer in the village. When I awoke this morning, I had such a vivid memory of the night on the beach (although I don't think I'd been dreaming again) that I went to Pilki's house. I had some idea of asking him about the meaning of my dream. He's no longer there. He has left, someone informed me in sign language. No one in his household seemed particularly upset except for Lolli, one of his granddaughters. Her eyes were red, as though from crying, but perhaps there's no connection. I went to the beach. The children were playing hopscotch. I viewed the game differently now, and I asked them why they are always playing it, and why only at sunrise and sunset. To begin and end the day properly, they replied. Is it a game? A prayer? A training for the ritual I witnessed (maybe) the night of the festival? Or why not all of these together?

Tilitha was in her usual place, not far from the children. I expected some banter about the other night to reassure me it was all a drunken dream. But she said nothing. She was playing with one of those large shells sometimes washed in by the waves—a nautilus. After the brief moment of shared silence that is our greeting, I asked her where Pilki was. She turned the shell over and over, not answering, the delicate membranes between her fingers stretching and shrinking like a pulse-beat.

"When I was little," she said dreamily, as though not hearing my question, "I used to wonder what happened to the animal in this shell when it died. I thought it must get smaller and smaller as it went further and further into the shell, until one day it disappeared."

She handed me the shell. Its surface had been broken by the scouring sea or by the creature's predator. I could see the inner passages of the nautilus, the delicate, opalescent helix coiling around the transversal cone. I dropped the shell, annoyed by her apparent evasiveness. Was Pilki dead? Tilitha picked up the shell and blew off the sand.

"No, Pilki has left. He is elsewhere. As you are elsewhere here—more than you are elsewhere here. But he can never come back."

More than I was elsewhere here? Tilitha's forefinger, the tip of its claw just showing, traced the shell's spiral from the wide end to its apex. I tried to talk about my dream, but she held out the shell again.

"There is a tale. After Taïke fell from the mirror-world, she was very lonely. She hadn't yet met Tilith. One day she found this shell on the beach and picked it up. It reminded her of her longing for mirror-world. She lifted it to her ear and heard the word of the universe."

What had that to do with my dream?

Tilitha placed the shell in my hand with gentle authority. "Your dream," she said.

In exasperation I threw the shell far out into the waves where Tilitha's cousins were dancing. She shook her head and slid into the sea.

My dream. The nautilus. The spiral-song, the helix. Pilki's disappearance. I waited for the spark that would set all these data alight, but nothing came. Back in the village I tried to question the villagers—not openly, of course, if there's one thing I've learned, it's that this subject is really taboo, since even Tilitha couldn't answer me directly. My deviousness got me nowhere. People pretended not to understand, remarking with veiled amusement that things had got pretty hot at the festival. So here I am with my diary, alone beneath the great wheel of the stars. Tilitha hasn't come out of the sea to watch the sunset, or the daylight sky closing like a mother-of-pearl fan as night draws in. The sand beneath my feet is dotted with little rolling shells. Shells. Rolling. The wheel of the stars. The word of the universe. Taïke's mirror-world. My dream. The thread of words that coil and uncoil. A slow turning, more and more resonant, more and more . . .

motionless movement, resonant and deep, like that sensation of motionless movement by which, when the interior and exterior change places just before the moment when the cold when the imperceptible irresistible coiling when the cold eyes closed the cold when breathing slows when the breathing slows when the vibrating thread of consciousness when all must stop then the motionless and profound movement of the Voyage through the Bridge, the Bridge!

But how do they do it—how *would* they do it? Suspend animation? Induced trance? I'd never encountered anything like it before. The Voyage without the Bridge. Never, anywhere. . . . How is it possible? I'd have to know more about the metabolism of *hendemados* and arevags. (Return to Baïblanca?) Heaven knows what those biosculptors invented six hundred years ago. Maybe they didn't know themselves, or perhaps evolution has continued to shape their creatures in forms they never imagined. . . .

No, it's not possible. A Voyage without a Bridge, a one-way, uncontrollable Voyage—it's death. Tilitha must have been talking about death. And yet she did say, "He is elsewhere, as you are elsewhere here—more than you are elsewhere here." But if this is a Voyage, how do they know it? Have those kinds of voyagers arrived here? And yet she was so quick to understand my explanations, the universes, my Voyage. . . .

No, it's a dream. It must be a dream, because I've hunted through my Total Recall and there's nothing . . . but Total Recall records dreams too, so why would this one be so nebulous?

March 23, later: Tilitha again answered (but is it an answer?) that Pilki is elsewhere and that he won't come back. (She's so serene. I wonder why?) So I really did see something that night, and it wasn't just a dream? Pilki has gone on a Voyage? Have visitors come here the same way Pilki

has arrived elsewhere? No. Well, how does she know he's elsewhere, in that case?

"Before you came among us," she said finally, "we didn't know, we weren't sure. Now we know why no one ever came back. Pilki is elsewhere. And he's not Pilki anymore."

"If he's no longer Pilki, then he's dead!"

"Yes and no," she answered, always with that disconcerting assurance. "If he were still Pilki, he couldn't really be elsewhere. That's the price you have to pay."

Suddenly she seemed so strange in the pearly dawn light, such a stranger with her incomprehensible certainties, so totally, terribly, alien. . . . I felt we could talk all day long, all our lives long, and I wouldn't even begin to understand. She's there, so close to me that I can touch her, but she seems to be . . . in another universe. And yet I'm the one who is the Voyager. Who was the Voyager.

Who could become a Voyager once more. Total Recall doesn't tell me anything about what happens between the moment I lose consciousness in the Bridge's capsule and the moment I wake on another planet. Suppose I were in the middle of the circle, in the middle of the universe-word like Pilki. Perhaps I wouldn't remember anything when I awoke elsewhere. Really elsewhere?

"If it really is elsewhere, you can't tell. Look," Tilitha said, pointing to her dolphins leaping out of the sea at some distance from the shore. Their black bodies glistened as they described perfect arcs in the air. "We are able to come on land and remain the same, just as our land sisters and brothers can go under water. But the dolphins . . . the dolphins can't fly. They're not made to fly. If they stayed in the air they'd no longer be dolphins. That would be the price they'd pay for becoming birds, for being truly elsewhere, don't you see?"

March 29: Pilki isn't dead, but he's no longer Pilki. In order to go elsewhere, truly elsewhere, he has become totally other. I understand. A transformation over which no control is possible, an irreversible metamorphosis, a Voyage from which you can't come back. A Voyage with no control, ever. I can grasp the concept intellectually, but my whole past life, all my conditioning as a Voyager, refuses to accept it. Yet what if this is the price of breaking out of the circle, of going truly elsewhere?

It's odd. All these years I've spent leaping from one universe to another in search of something I wouldn't recognize, and I've never once asked myself how I'd know it, how I'd identify the other universe-tree. How can anyone recognize absolute difference? Can it even be perceived? When I thought about it, I naively told myself it would be a kind of illumination, that I'd *know*. It never occurred to me that it must be a one-way illumination, changing you irremediably, tearing you from yourself. How can you know the absolute-other if you carry your own reflection around with you everywhere? You can't simply *recognize*. You have to be other, no longer yourself. . . . impossible not to think "cease to be" (Tilitha—between the world and its reflections, unable to stay in the universe where she was born, flowing out of it and, as she fell, creating another universe.) The price to pay. I never thought there'd be a price to pay: giving up control, giving up certainty—giv-

ing up oneself. A gamble. To get to the edge of the spiral, to the last syllable of the universe-word, and leap.

The law of the Voyage is still valid, though. I have indeed sent myself into a universe where a Bridge exists. A kind of Bridge. A Bridge you burn as you cross it. And of course none of those Voyagers has come back to describe other universe-trees. Even if they could, their truth would be incommunicable. Is that really what I was looking for, an incommunicable truth? No, I wanted to come back and tell the story, and that's still what I want. But I can't have it both ways. If I go, I become other. If I come back, if I become myself once more, I'll be unable to describe the otherness. Either way there's a price to pay.

But I did send myself here, where choice is possible. Go. Stay. Just as it was twenty years ago when I became a Voyager. But that wasn't really a question of choice: I'd already decided by coming to the Center and undergoing the operations and training. I didn't leave right away because of Egon, because I wasn't sure he didn't love me. . . . And in the end I left without being sure, on an impulse. That wasn't a real choice.

Go. Stay. If I leave, will it be out of defiance? If I stay, will it be out of fear? I don't know. I just don't know.

Tilitha felt the call of the dolphins' dance. She got up, and I followed her to the water's edge. The tide had washed the nautilus ashore again. A different nautilus, though, with a perfect shell. Tilitha nudged it with her foot, smiling, and I picked it up. I shook out the sand and water. They came out in spurts, first passing from one chamber to another, sliding along the intricate coils of the inner surfaces. The chambered nautilus is an amazing shell: the volume enclosed by its internal surfaces is greater than the volume enclosed by its outer surface. There is more space inside the nautilus than its shell occupies.

"For us," Tilitha suddenly said, "the world, our world, is a nautilus. It takes a long, long time to explore its entire space, and rarely, very rarely, do we ever reach the end. Pilki thought he had reached it. Do you think you've reached it, Ao Talitha?"

Not knowing how to answer, I put the same question to her. She smiled. Long ago, when she was younger, she thought so. She retreated beneath the waves to meditate for a protracted period, after which she took a long journey through the sea, far from the kelp forest where the arevays live, and far from the coast as well. She visited the lands-beneath-the-sea, the drowned countries, their monuments, their cities, their mountains. On the way back she went to Aomanukera (the-city-of-Manu, as they call Baiblanca), and she decided she wasn't ready to go elsewhere.

"For me, elsewhere is here, with my companions in the village, my sisters and cousins beneath the sea. So many things to learn, always. And you, Ao Talitha, do you think you've learned everything?" she asked, gently insistent. "Do you believe you've come to the end of this world?"

To the end. The end of this world? Know everything about this world? No, of course not. Never. You are right, alien from the sea who bears a name so close to mine, you are right, Ao Talitha. I don't know, I won't know, not for a long time. Not before I die, perhaps.

Is there more space within than without? ♦

Totally Spaced Barbie



Margaret Ball

It just goes to show, you never know what's going to happen to you in this life. One minute you're safe in your platform box beside your sisters, Capellan Barbie (blonde, in the blue snakeskin suit with detachable tail) and Totally Nails Barbie (blonde, with bioprogrammed fingernails that really grow) And the next minute, instead of being bought into a safe home, you're out here. No, I don't know exactly where. Just let me explain, okay?

To think I actually vamped the little monster when she showed up! But hey, it gets boring back in Row 55-AA of WeZ ToyZ. My little sisters back in the storeroom wanted a chance to make their own debut. And the kid's mother was trying to talk her into Capellan

Illustration by Scott Roberts

Barbie just to save the 55-credit surcharge that goes with a top-of-the-line Barbie like yours truly. If there's anything I hate, it's a cheapskate parent. After all, our motto at WeZ ToyZ is "Spend it on your kids," or, as Mall Barbie puts it, "Deep-fry that plastic, Mom!"

So there was Ms. Cheapskate talking up the pretty blue snakeskin on the floor model (she didn't even want to buy her kid the extra set of skin for when Capellan Barbie has her growth spurt and sheds the original—that'll show you the kind of pennypincher she was!). And all I did was swivel my head and give the kid a little wink. Well, all right. So maybe I did project a hat. *You and me can have fun together*. Hey, it's one of my standard set of phrases. A girl's gotta use what talents she's got.

Luckily, the brat picked up on it right away; she was a good receiver. I'll say that for her. "I want that one, Momma!" she screeched. "That's a Space Barbie with the enhanced teleprojector just like the one Jenny Fabian got, that's the one I always wanted, please please please!" Totally ugh. I mean, like rusty nails, that screech. And she had glasses, too. Now, what kind of parents put glasses on their kids in this day and age, when you can get their eyes bioformed for 20/20 and any color you want thrown in at hardly any extra charge? Only a real tightwad would make a sweet little girl wait until her vision stats had stabilized before allowing her to experience true beauty. And I don't care what you say, eight-year-olds do know from sex appeal. Why do you think they like me so much?

I had a few qualms right then about joining a family that bred from Mommy Cheap to Kid Ugly with the voice that shattered a thousand windows. But hey, I couldn't like back down in front of Capellan Barbie, could I? Her little sisters would be hissing and writhing at me forever. Oh, the humiliation! So I projected again. *Space is beautiful*.

Her eyes shone behind the glasses, and just for a minute I thought there might be, like, some real future to this relationship. "Yes," she breathed, "oh, yes! Mommy, I have to have that one! You promised I could have any one I want YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED YOU PROMISED!"

Well of iron, that kid. At the time I thought it was great. After all, she was getting me off the shelf and into the real world. As her mom sighed and dropped me into the shopping basket, I was already visualizing the life ahead of me. Tea parties every afternoon. Trading clothes with all the sister Barbies the kid must already own. Maybe a prom night—although that would require some serious thought. What if she didn't have Space Ken? Would it be beneath my dignity to go to the prom with Pre-Can cerous Tan Ken or even, Mattel forbid, that nerdy Cyber-punk Ken?

We weren't in the house ten minutes before I began to realize my error. "Wait here, Space Barbie," the kid says, dropping me on her bed. "I just have to get some stuff and I'll be right back."

Well! I took the chance to glim around my new surroundings, and I tell you, my heart sank. Sure, it looked all right at first glance, blondes and brunettes with regulation-size tits and waists piled up on the pillows, but what a low-life crowd. They weren't even true Barbies! They

were generics. Cheap rip-offs. Now, I'm no snob, but I do have my standards, and as I politely explained to one of the Marbies when she suggested a clothes swap, I never wear clothes that you don't know where they've been. They could have cooties or something.

The Barbie just kind of snuffed at that, but one of the Brunette Barlas tried to deck me. Fortunately, with the lightning reflexes bio-implanted in all the improved model Space Barbies, I toppled over and hit the bed just before her swing would have connected. I was going to roll over and give her the old pointed space boot in the generic tits, but just then the kid charged back in with a big cardboard box in her arms and we all froze.

"I told you to wait, Barbie," the kid said, dropping the box with a clank and scooping me up.

Great Mattel! I hope I'm not snobbish, but we do have certain standards to uphold, and proper naming was one of the first things they taught us in the factory. If we let them call us all "Barbie," as if there were no difference between us but the clothes and accessories, how would they ever be inspired to go out and buy sister Barbies for us to socialize with?

Space Barbie, I projected at top volume. (No need to keep it down—the Mom was at the other end of the house, doing something totally, grossly retro like opening self-heating protein packs with her own hands. I could just tell this was the kind of retro household that wouldn't even have a proper Mealomat.) Oh, what had I done?

No need to despair, I told myself. The first thing is to maintain proper standards. First, train the child, then later perhaps I can uplift these low-class Marbies and Barlas to be fit servants. Or better yet, work on the child's emerging good taste until she junked the Marbies and Barlas in favor of true, proper Sister Barbies. *Hello. My name is Space Barbie. My name is Space Barbie*. I wanted to add, "Have you got that yet, you dumb brat?" but the internal projector chip is sort of limited. I can converse just fine with my sisters, of course, but for mental projection to these meatcreatures I'm stuck with the extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases preprogrammed in by Mattel.

"Okay, okay, I heard you the first time!" the kid said with that aggravating whine in her voice. "Can't you project anything else?"

I dearly wanted to tell her, "At least I can project, unlike you stupid meatcreatures who have to use crude old sound waves," but by some inexplicable oversight that phrase had been omitted from my extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases. I had to fall back on the standard routines.

You and me can have fun together. Space is beautiful. When does our starship leave? The captain is cute. Is there a masquerade ball tonight? I need a totally cute costume.

I thought I'd done a pretty good job of projecting the fun games we could play, together with a few hints about the accessories she'd need. Even if Tight Wallet Mom wouldn't spring for the pink and silver Barbieship right away, she could at least get the kid one of the Space Masquerade Gowns for me to wear. Actually they're exactly

like the Prom Gowns and the Capellan Snake Formals. Except of course the Prom Gowns have a corsage of orchids, and the Capellan Snake Formals have that plastiscare border and a cutout for the detachable tail, and the Space Masquerade Gowns have this cute little hem of real light-up stars (batteries not included).

But instead of responding to the subtle hints in my extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases, the whiny brat got a disgusted look on her face. "Whaddya mean, the captain is cute? You're the captain!"

Fortunately, Mattel had given me an all-purpose phrase for such emergencies. *Who, me? I'm just a girl!*

"So am I," the brat said, "and I'm going to be a starship captain when I grow up, and I'm going to practice with you." She sat down on the floor beside her bed and began hauling yucky green metal tubes out of the cardboard box she'd dragged in earlier. "How do you like the spaceship? I built it myself. Well, it was a kit. From Edmundo Science and Space Surplus. I had to make a few little changes, though. The original design was really primitive—no warp drives. You'd be stuck below lightspeed forever. So I took Jenny Fabian's Space Barbie apart and used its projection system. With a few mods, naturally."

I was too horrified to project, even if there'd been anything in my extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases to cover the situation. I had fallen among cannibals! What did she plan to do—dismember me for spare parts? Give my silver space suit to a Marlise and my perfectly swirled spaceage coiffure to a Brunette Barla?

I might have been better off if she had. But her fiendish plan was worse than that. As she fitted bits of army-green tubing together and chatted about how she'd modified the projection system to link in with mine and project Mattel-matter through space, the horrid truth began to dawn on me.

She actually thought I was *going* somewhere in that totally tacky piece of junk—and it wasn't to the Space Masquerade Ball, either.

I frantically searched through my extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases. Ah. *Astrogation class is bard.*

"Tough titty, Space Barbie," the kid murmured. "I wanted you, I got you, and now you're going to outer space for me. It's quite simple, really," the mini-fiend assured me. "You just have to project where you're going to the modified system in the spaceship, and then project back when you're ready. You won't actually need your notes from astrogation class. Maybe Ken will slip you a copy of his when you get back. Ha-ha-ha."

Her laugh was even more grating than her whine. And the moment of truth was approaching—her grubby little paw was even now reaching out to drop me into the green tin can. *I want my pink and silver Barbieship*, I protested.

"No, you don't," the little monster said. "I looked at the specs on the Barbieship. There's no internal programming whatsoever—you'd never get out of this room, let alone past the planetary gravitational field."

The what? *Astrogation class is bard*, I projected at top volume.

"Marla!" the Mom yelled. "Keep it down in there! Your damn toy is giving me a headache!"

Marla the Fiend gave me a gap-toothed grin. "See? You're disturbing my mother. Into space you go!"

My mind was awash as she jammed me ruthlessly into the can, wrinkling my Silvertone Spandex Space Suit and dislodging a spiral curl from my Silver Space Coiffure. She was yammering away the whole time. "I'm linking you with the spaceship system now, okay?"

I barely registered the words, I was still searching through my extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases for something that would persuade her what a mistake she was making. This wasn't what I was made for! What did I know about space? What I knew was clothes, and hair, and parties—Ah. *Where's the party?* I projected as the lid came down. A pop and a whirring noise answered me.

"Just project where you're going," she'd said. I should have listened.

If anybody's interested, I can tell them where the party is. Somewhere outside a big ball of gas. The spaceship console flashed some weird nerdy name, Jupen or Juniper or something. Hey, what do I know about the galaxy? I was supposed to be on my pink and silver Barbieship, having pink Barbie cocktails with Space Ken, the captain. Anyway, we're not near Jupi-whatsit any more, so I can't read the console and tell you what it said. I've been all over since then. But in my entire extensive library of sophisticated communication phrases there doesn't seem to be a projection for *Take me home*.

So I'm sending this by intersister communication, to any Barbie or Marlise or Barla who might pick it up. Please come and get me. Even if you have to use one of those tacky mauve and grey Barbieships. I won't say a word about cooties this time. Honest, sisters. I just want to go home.

Astrogation class is bard. ♦

Passing Nights

George Zebrowski

You woke up that night and stared into the darkness, your body tense with expectation as the wall by your bed dissolved and became a way into a deep, windy blackness. You were not afraid, but you remembered a fear still to come as a human figure faded into view, bright with an electric glow that seemed to come from within. Pale, clothed in sickly green seaweed, the battered male torso drifted toward you, bleeding into the black, oily water, eyes gazing at you from a haggard, familiar face, foggy breath billowing out of its mouth.

You cried out then, and the figure twisted around, showing cuts, abrasions, and bruises in a sickly, brine-shrunk patchwork of red, white, and gray. You reached out to the wall, to see if the scene was real.

"Don't!" the man shouted



Illustration by Tony Lee

with great effort, went under, came up splashing and grabbed at his left arm.

"Where are you?" you asked, sitting up, eyes wide open, nostrils filling with ocean smells.

"Don't," the man whispered as you reached into the wall, felt the cold water, and pulled your hand back.

The man moved away, as if suddenly caught in a powerful current. His eyes were closed, as if he had found peace. You blinked as the view broke up into a grainy collection of yellow dots and light exploded into the room, destroying the vision.

"Charles, are you okay?"

"Just a bad dream, Mom," you answered, lying back and staring at the clean yellow of the recently painted wall as the overhead light went out.

"Go back to sleep, darling," your mother said lovingly, gently closing the door.

Your eyes adjusted to the dark and you looked at the wall. There was nothing there, but you knew that the wall was waiting for you. It would be waiting for you every night.

* * *

This is the end, you tell yourself as you drift in the water. The ship had been a part of your own body, torn open by the torpedo's explosion, hurling you into the water, where you bled into the black liquid, returning your inner sea to the salty commonwealth.

But death refuses you. Your pulse beats, and you feel that your right hand is locked around the bleeding in your left arm, unable to let go.

The sea rocks you as you drift. You open your eyes, expecting to see stars, but there is only a cloudless darkness, without even a bright patch where the moon should be. I'm dying, you tell yourself. Might as well admit it. Eyesight's blackening. It's one of the signs. You can't feel your toes. It surprises you, as much as you can be surprised, how little you care. The body prepares itself. Messengers go out to all the distant provinces of muscle and bone, whispering gently for them to slow down and accept death—the distinguished thing, as some literary folk once called it. There is no life after death. You'll see. And you laugh, but it's like trying to break marble with a rubber hammer, and you wheeze and nearly weep from the pain of the convulsive effort.

Suddenly, white light floods into your eyes. Recovering, you see the boy that you were, staring at you from the room that you loved, and you remember what he feels but doesn't understand yet. You recall having seen what he sees, what he once saw for three nights, as you gaze into that bedroom where the future is still a fabulous country, waiting to be entered. All times are woven

together, so why shouldn't they cast something of themselves forward and backward now and then?

As you look into the boy's sleepy eyes, you realize that these moments have been waiting for both of you all your lives, that two pieces of time are being drawn toward each other by the gravity of remembrance, and there is nothing you can do about the coming collision.

The sea becomes very still suddenly, and you watch the boy reach into the water as if into a mirror, and draw his hand back, surprised that it is not wet. He repeats the action and is startled as some ghostly water spills onto his bed, and you realize with dismay piled on hopelessness that it was your yearning for the shelter of the past that would now destroy it. You needed to be back in that room on a twelve-year-old's Friday night, looking forward to Saturday morning, when you would go biking and later stop at the park to watch girls playing under the big oak tree, not quite sure why they were so pleasant to look at, feeling the play of impulses within yourself. You needed that past as you had never needed your present or future, but you had to get on the treadmill of killing to realize how little you had to give to anything or anyone.

Think! your fogged brain commands. Your need will destroy the past unless you act. Will the boy's death end your pain? Will you still be here if the past is changed?

But what can you do? What can a dying man do for anyone?

You try to pull down the bridge between the boy in the bedroom and the man in the water by denying your need for the past's islands of happiness, but the two moments draw even closer toward dissolution. The boy crawls back on the bed, astonished by the water that is now threatening to burst across time, and suddenly you know what you must do.

You listen to the unforging whisper of the sea, and slowly your right hand loosens its grip on your bleeding left arm. You watch the hand move away as if it belongs to someone else, and see your bleeding resume its gentle flow into the black water.

The boy and the bedroom slip away, and you close your eyes, relieved that the link seems to be weakening. Your past and present are safe, but you have severed your future. There's no helping that. You have to be alive for the bridge to stand.

And for a few moments it continues to stand, and you are that boy staring at the wall in fear and wonder, opening and closing your eyes, fleeing back and forth between the bedroom and the cold darkness of futurity, where the sea drinks your blood and the blackness crowds the light from your eyes. ♦

Ecology, Environment, Esthetics—and Economics

Stephen L. Gillett

I once heard a naive fan speak of humanity as a "toxic parasite" on the biosphere. Such a notion seems common these days. Or at least, it's common among those people with the degree of personal wealth to afford such handwringing.

But this notion misunderstands both biosphere and parasite. *All* organisms—with the possible exception of primitive photosynthesizers and chemolithotrophs—are "parasites" on the biosphere. Everything is living off everything else. Against hardly a benign backdrop, too; as I've pointed out, "Mother" Nature also wipies out a lot of things.

In fact, most questions of "ecology" are really questions of esthetics and economics. And most questions of "pollution" are really due to inadequate accounting—of ignoring hidden costs, of not paying attention to the economics of the entire system.

Take litter, for example. It's ugly but almost irrelevant ecologically. Now, don't misunderstand, I hate litter, and I pick up aluminum cans routinely. But my hating it doesn't mean it's a threat to the biosphere. It's just my esthetic sense.

Indeed, the "higher" life forms that have the greatest emotional attachment for people ("save the whale/wolf/etc.") are the least relevant to the biosphere. The unglamorous microbes are the true hewers of wood and drawers of water—the true supporters of the biosphere. As biologists such as Stephen Jay Gould and Lynn Margulis repeatedly point out, we still live in an Age of Bacteria—as has been the case on the Earth since life arose in the early Precambrian. The multicelled creatures that appeared less than 600 million years ago do not reflect evolutionary "prog-

ress" to "higher" animals, but merely a nearly irrelevant superstructure.

One amusing example of our bias toward "higher" life forms is eutrophication, which was a burning issue back around the first Earth Day in 1970. Eutrophication is rampant growth—a "bloom"—of algae in surface water, due to an unusual influx of nutrients. Such things as treated sewage effluent and runoff from agricultural lands cause eutrophication, because they're rich in vital nutrients like nitrate and phosphate. Eutrophication is considered a no-no because it kills fish: the algae use up all the dissolved oxygen. But this is a question of microbes vs. fish, not of the health of the "biosphere." Eutrophication is sure good for the algae! And in terms of consuming CO₂, to counteract the rise of carbon dioxide in the air, algae are a lot more efficient than higher plants. So eutrophication actually has its good points.

For another example, environmentalists commonly wring their hands about "clearcuts"—when a section of forest is completely cut, and then the leftover cuttings (branches and such—the "slash") are burned. Sure, it looks like a mess, and is a lot uglier than the forest was. But clearcuts have lots of good points. For one thing, grasses and sun-loving shrubs rapidly invade the clearcuts, and wildlife follow those plants because they make excellent forage. An overgrown, scrubby clearcut, in fact, supports many more "higher" life forms such as deer than the mature forest.

And clearcuts aren't even particularly "unnatural"—they're pretty much what happens in the aftermath of a forest fire—a perfectly natural event, and one necessary to clear new places for the shrubs, grasses, and ul-

timately new trees. A friend of mine who's a professional forester shakes his head at the demand for more "natural," selective logging. In fact, "selective" logging is *unnatural*!

As far as that goes, North American forests have recovered a great deal in the twentieth century. While recently at Shasta Dam in northern California, for example, I was struck with the comeback of the surrounding forest in the 50 years since the dam was built. In the construction photos, taken in the late 1930s and early 40s, the surrounding hills are nearly bare—and now they're covered with dense thickets of manzanita and pine.

So, let's turn to something that hasn't come back—the "dredgeland" around Sumpter in the Blue Mountains of northeastern Oregon. Here, in an astounding example of shortsightedness, a valley consisting of prime farm and grazing land was dredged for gold back in the early 1900s.

Such a gold dredge extracted tiny amounts of native gold from a huge background of ordinary dirt; a placer mine writ large, if you will. It consisted of a barge sitting in its own pool of water. On one end, a huge shovel chewed away at the sediments and dumped the rubble into a set of separation meshes and sluices. There, the gold was separated because of its density; then the dredge excreted the piles of gold-free rubble out the back. As the dredge dug its way along, its pond moved with it, as it filled in behind it what it dug out front.

Doesn't sound so bad, does it? But when the dredge dumped the rubble, it dropped the fines (silts and clays) first. Then the coarse stuff (cobble and boulders) was mounded on top. The result by any standard was horri-

ic; acres upon acres of once-good land chewed up and changed into great mounds of coarse rubble. It's not even good land for a parking lot! (The land will heal eventually, of course. Dredge-lands about a century old near Sacramento, California, now support a dense second-growth scrub forest; and in a few more millennia, you won't even know the land was dredged.)

But even so there's a bright spot: although it's thoroughly ruined farmland, it's great waterfowl cover! Around Sumpter, the water table is high enough that little ponds have filled in between the great rubble heaps; and they support a thriving population of ducks and geese. Tules and other aquatic plants grow just fine in the ponds, and the birds are quite safe. It's very difficult for predators (including two-legged ones carrying shotguns) to make their way across the cobble piles to reach the little ponds in between.

Of course, the tradeoff probably wasn't worth it. And that leads back into the economics—at which environmentalists commonly hristle. They commonly believe that the "economic" approach is just the problem. But that's not true.

In fact, the fault lies not in economics; it lies in the costing out. For consider: the dredge recovered gold at a profit for its owners, but dredging had huge hidden costs that were not borne by the owners. It destroyed or severely damaged a capital resource (farmland) of great and varied long-term value that no social mechanism compelled the owners to pay for. Thus, it was an accounting problem!

The same sort of analysis applies to pollution in general. For in dumping pollutants into (say) streams, a manufacturer is avoiding costs by imposing them on others; indeed, he's often dispersing the costs so widely that the people assuming them tend not to notice. And, to be sure, a little pollution is no pollution—it's taken care of automatically. (Contrarily, when things are so flagrant that other people notice they're being put upon, they tend to react. This is not a new phenomenon, either: check out some of the pollution litigation that occurred from such things as dumped mine waste in the oh-so-wild West.)

Now, to be sure, the economic analysis may work for pollution, but there's another aspect: the esthetic one. For what is the value of (say) an undammed river, or of undredged farmland? Different people will give different answers, and the answers will range all the way up to "invaluable", e.g., you can't put a cost at all on the value of a free-flowing river.

This diversity in assessed value is most reasonably viewed as a question of esthetics. Even though it's often presented as a question of fundamental "values," in fact those professing those values already possess the economic surplus to choose them without major hardship.

And in either case it's not a question of the health of the biosphere!

Let's look at some more examples. We'll see that considerations of economics and esthetics rear up in alleged "ecology" issues much more than their advocates seem to realize.

Dams, for example. They're ecologically incorrect these days, of course. And, to be sure, they cause a vast rearrangement of ecosystems. But "rearrangement" is the key word. Unquestionably, they disrupt and even destroy native fish populations; they derange sedimentation patterns; they tend to raise salinity by increasing evaporation; and they can devastate estuaries at the river's mouth, which often rely on an influx of nutrients from the river. (Geologically, they're also very short-lived—but admittedly that's not too relevant on a human timescale.)

But the key word is 'rearrangement.' Dams have a beneficial effect on lots of other wildlife, such as fish species that like slack water, and wildlife and waterfowl that thrive with the access to permanent water. Take, for example, the Columbia Basin project in Washington State, in which the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River destroyed the salmon run in the upper Columbia. However, irrigation fed by the dam, across the previously arid Columbia plateau, has had lots of spinoff for wildlife: the raised water table has been a boon to the wild vegetation (and the wildlife that feeds on them), and the multitude of reservoirs created has now made the Columbia plateau a

major waterfowl flyway. (People in the Pacific Northwest now tend to take the power generated for granted, too, but that's a different issue.)

As far as that goes, "Mother" Nature dams rivers all by herself. The Grand Canyon, for example, has been blocked many times by far greater dams than anything the BuRec ever dreamed of: by such things as lava flows or mammoth landslides, when blocks of canyons wall hundreds—even thousands—of feet on a side moved hoddily into the canyon. Some of these ancient slides even changed the river's course slightly; as it eroded back through them, it cut a new channel in the bedrock below, displaced from the old one. (Though the signs of these ancient dams are hardly obvious to a layperson, they're plain to a geologist.)

To be sure, running rivers offer many things that dammed rivers don't. Whiterwater rafting, for one. But that's an esthetic (and economic) consideration. (And yes, I've done lots of whitewater, in case you were going to ask.)

Agriculture, that emotional paragon of "living in touch with the land," is actually one of the most devastating innovations for the "ecology." It's real good for food crops, but it severely impacts the biodiversity. And it can lead to environmental degradation, too, as when topsoil is denuded through overplowing or overgrazing, or when irrigation sterilizes soils through induced salinity. (So much for "back to nature." These are not just modern problems, either!)

But, to be sure, as with other ecological rearrangements, other opportunistic organisms (e.g., locusts, rabbits) find new ways to make a living from agriculture. (More on that below.)

And in any event lots of the natural world we're so eager to preserve is, geologically speaking, a short-lived accident. Take estuaries and the destruction thereof, which has been an emotional issue. But all modern estuaries are extremely young anyway; they result from drowning of river mouths by the sea-level rise from the melting of the Pleistocene glaciers about 10,000 years ago. Indeed, a number of estuaries in the Mediterranean have filled in historical times.

a few Greek towns that were ports in ancient times are now far inland.

So estuaries are geologically ephemeral, they're being filled in by sediment brought down by the rivers they've invaded, and they're being actively walked off from the sea by sediment transported by longshore currents.

They're highly productive biologically, but that's an economic question! They're a geologic accident, and Nature is filling them in again.

Paradoxically, other natural phenomena are valued because they *aren't* biologically productive. Take Lake Tahoe, for example, the largest alpine lake in North America, which lies in the Sierra Nevada just up the road from where I live. The clarity of Lake Tahoe's water is legendary (see, for example, Mark Twain's 19th-century observations in *Roughing It*). And, as you might guess, much effort and time has been expended to "keep Lake Tahoe clear." But Lake Tahoe is so clear because it's a biological desert. That cold alpine water is extremely nutrient-poor, so it supports little in the way of aquatic ecosystems.

Other living things are also adaptive. They don't necessarily succumb to humanity's (or Nature's) capricious rearrangements of the environment. Instead, they commonly adapt to them and often thrive because of them. Lots of critters are just as opportunistic as people.

Cities have become important wildlife reservoirs, for birds especially: mourning doves, waterfowl, any number of songbirds—not to mention pigeons! I once was startled to encounter pigeons living on basalt rimrock in a remote part of central Washington State. In fact, though, such cliffs are pigeons' natural habitat, although, to be sure, in Eurasia rather than North America. They're even called "rock doves" over there. And they like modern cities because the buildings are just like cliffs.

Even more bizarrely, the military has tens of thousands of acres out West reserved as gunnery ranges, from which the public is completely excluded. Ironically, these areas have proven valuable, not just as wildlife refuges, but as "control" study areas for the behavior of wildlife that's not routinely exposed to human beings.

(For example, half the Desert Game Range of southern Nevada, whose purpose is to protect the desert bighorn sheep, lies on the Nellis Air Force Base Bombing and Gunnery Range.)

Sagebrush, which covers much of the mountain West and is reputed to be the most common shrub in North America, owes much of its current abundance to overgrazing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Cattle don't eat it unless they're desperate, so it spread at the expense of the grass. Obviously, whatever humanity's effects on the other plants, it was good for the sage! Back in the 50s and 60s, the BLM had a program of "range enhancement", rip out the sage and plant grass instead. This was stopped a while back, because of concern about destroying the sage and the ecosystems it supports(!).

Not all opportunists are pleasant. Cheatgrass is a fast-growing grass, not native to North America, that has extremely obnoxious hard, tufted seeds that work their way into clothing or animal hair. For humans, with hands, the seeds are at most an annoyance, but they can seriously injure animals by causing wounds that then abscess. Even so, although cheat is a hassle, it's still part of the biosphere. And it has certainly profited handsomely from humanity's activities.

Similarly for salt cedar (tamarisk) in the Colorado River system. This is a tree with wispy gray-green thread-like fronds instead of leaves. It's now ubiquitous in the Southwest, even though it's native to the Middle East. Although it's not as attractive as the native willow, it's much harderier and much faster growing. (Contrariwise, certain species of southwestern cacti have similarly found the Near East—and also Australia—congenial.)

A hassle? Yes. An economic cost? Certainly. But a threat to the biosphere? C'mon! Species have been spreading their ranges since species first existed. Even the speed of the spread is not unprecedented: North American flora and fauna flooded into South America a few million years ago when the Central American land bridge rose. So despite occasional accusations of "ecological imperialism," this is nothing new and nothing particularly cosmic.

But surely the loss of biodiversity, as less well-adapted species are crowded out, is a concern. After all, we're losing information that could be valuable—not to mention esthetically pleasing.

Yes, the loss is a consideration—but now we're back into considerations of esthetics and economics!

Even the ballyhooed greenhouse effect will be very short-lived geologically. The carbon dioxide level in the atmosphere is set ultimately by chemical equilibrium with carbonate rocks (limestones) in the crust. This reaction, in fact, fine-tunes Earth's climate over geologic time: when things get too warm, rocks weather more quickly and soak up more CO₂, when things are cold, CO₂ accumulates and warms them up again. The catch is that it just takes a while to respond.

So although (say) flooded tidewater cities and shifting grain-growing belts may cause major dislocations, they're merely (!) a question of economics again—not of the safety of the biosphere.

So does this all mean that we don't need to worry? That everything's going to be hunky-dory, no matter what we do? No, it doesn't. It remains true that everything's hooked to everything else, and that humanity's rearrangements often have unanticipated (and unwanted) effects; but realize that our concern is for our own benefit, and for our own esthetic sense. The biosphere will chug along just fine without wolves, without whales, even without the rain forest. (And without humans as well.) After all, it did so throughout most of geologic time—and after all, we're *still* living in the Age of Bacteria. But we would be much the poorer for living in a world consisting only of bacteria, both economically and esthetically.

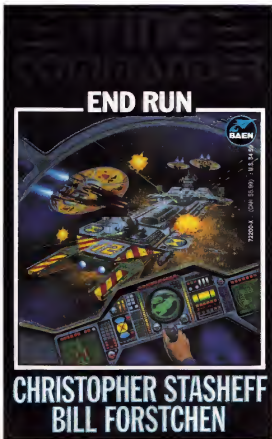
In fact, by making concern about the "ecology" less cosmic, less apocalyptic, and more tied into benefits, something meaningful to save the rainforest/whales/wolves is more likely to happen. People will work to save esthetic treasures: look at the efforts to preserve cultural artifacts such as cathedrals and archeological sites. And people most certainly will work to preserve their livelihoods! ♦

Looking Forward:

End Run

by Christopher Stasheff
and Bill Forstchen

Coming in January 1994 from Baen Books



Introduction by Bill Fawcett

In *End Run* two of today's top action writers have teamed up to tell another story set in the same universe as the *Wing Commander* computer games. In this book, a light carrier has to provide a distraction that will send the Kdratha navy scrambling after it. Trashing the home of the Emperor's mother does the job. Now all the carrier's crew has to do is survive. In this excerpt, the carrier's fighters have just dealt with one threat—only to discover they now have to face an even larger force.

"Tarawa combat control, what's the situation?"

"One of our recon craft already lost. Starlight reports many, repeat many bogeys on sortie from the second moon, three corvettes approaching as well. Captain O'Brian has ordered our escorts to move forward and engage."

That was standard procedure at least, but it bothered him that Grierson was not behind the *Tarawa* to sort of nudge O'Brian along.

"Deck flight officer!"

"Here, sir." Her image appeared on his commlink display.

"Push Doomsday up ahead of me on launch, I want at least one ship with torpedoes out there as quickly as possible."

"Aye, sir." She turned away to shout the orders.

Jason switched back to the combat information center on the bridge to keep an eye on developments. His tractor pulled him up towards the flight line and then came to a stop as Doomsday's Sabre cut in ahead of him, the squeeze so tight that for a moment he thought that their wings would hit.

The crew was improving. He'd never have pulled a change in launch sequencing only a week or two before. But now that the heat was on they seemed to be moving like clockwork. The hot launch fighters went out the air lock, Mongol, followed by Round Top and Lone Wolf and then Doomsday was moved up to the catapult. The Sabre snapped out, and then Jason was moved into position.

He leaned back as the launch officer pointed forward and he was out, kicking on full afterburner, leaping straight ahead to catch up to Doomsday. Switching over to Jamice, he called in for a report.

"This is Starlight. Pulling back fast, we've got at least twenty-five of them coming in hard. Dralith, Sartha, a couple of Grikkath and three Kamekh corvettes."

"Any carriers?"

"That's the mystery. Several of these fighters have ground camo paint schemes and no bloody carrier in sight."

"Hot damn!"

"I know. Damn it, Bear, we got within a hundred thousand clicks of the second moon before they finally scrambled. Kilrah was straight ahead a million and a half clicks away. God, what an awesome sight."

"Defenses?"

"Full planet defense screening was up on Kilrah. A dozen orbital bases, their commlink channels going wild. But no carriers. I got a good scan of everything before they came off the moon."

"Beam the info back to Tarawa now. Send it straight into Combat Information, set up a side hand to Svetlana and get it to those marines as well."

"Got it going now."

"Good work, head back in, rearm for combat support of landing operations."

Less than a minute later Jamice shot past at full throttle, with only one wingman. Two down, Jason realized. Straight ahead he was already getting preliminary lock on the incoming wave and it seemed as if the entire screen had turned red.

"Intrepid?"

"Grierson here."

"Why don't you break back, wait for more fighter support?"

Grierson laughed.

"Going in harm's way, son. We've got to keep them away from Tarawa."

"We'll support. We've got one torpedo load, will take on their lead corvette." Jason replied.

"Hot work there, why not hold back for more fighter support?" Grierson replied.

"No time, Intrepid."

Seconds later he shot past the two escort ships, moving in line abreast formation.

"Doomsday, I'm on your port side. Pick your target and I'll support."

"See you in hell," Doomsday shouted, and even as he spoke the first Kilrathi Sartha, moving as a forward screen, opened up. The shots were close, even when fired from maximum range, and Jason realized at once that these were not second-line pilots.

Doomsday rolled his ship, kicking on afterburners. Jason followed suit. He heard Round Top, Mongol and Lone Wolf calling out their targets as they waded into the head of the attack, trying to suppress Kilrathi defenses while the lone Sabre went in.

The space around Jason was crisscrossed with laser and neutron blasts, mass driver shots, and dozens of missiles. Pulling in directly behind Doomsday, so that he could almost see the color of his tail gunner's eyes, he watched his screen as three missiles tracked in and started to close.

"Missiles coming in!" Jason shouted.

"Setting up torpedo lock on their corvette, can't break!"

Jason watched the shots close in. When the warheads were within seconds of impact he popped off a spread of chaff and flares; two of the missiles detonated but one came straight through. He pulled on afterburner and shot straight up as the missile, sensing the greater heat display of Jason's engines, followed, ignoring Doomsday. Jason pulled into a skidding turn and then shut down his engines to present the cold silhouette of the forward half of his ship. The missile streaked past and he breathed a sigh of relief. And then it started to turn back as well.

He watched in horror as the missile weaved for a second and then picked up on the heat discharge still dissipating from his engine nozzle. The furlballs must have noticed that trick of turning and shutting down and reprogrammed their missiles to pick up on it. He started to fire up but knew that he was a dead man as the missile streaked straight in at him.

The missile detonated so close that he felt the jarring blow and it was several seconds before he realized that Lone Wolf, in a brilliant deflection shot, had destroyed the missile that was closing in for the kill.

"Good shooting, Kevin."

"What I'm paid for, sir."

Jason smiled and waved as Lone Wolf shot past, breaking astern to hold off the next wave of fighters. His knees felt like jelly and he took a deep breath, struggling to get calm and kill the gut-wrenching fear.

"We've got one! It's away!" Doomsday shouted.

Jason rolled his ship and looked over his shoulder as a spread of torpedoes streaked away from the Sabre and leaped in towards the lead Kilrathi corvette. The corvette sent out a spread of shot and then turned straight in to

present as narrow a target as possible. The torpedoes detonated across the bow, splitting the ship open, and it disappeared in a silently spreading ball of incandescent fire.

"Scratch one, Doomsday. Good shooting, now get the hell out."

Doomsday continued straight in and Jason, shouting a curse, followed. He felt an almost surreal sense take hold, as if instinct were guiding him. No longer even thinking on a conscious level, he weaved his way through the swirling engagement. A Grikath weaved in front, attempting to gain a lock on Doomsday, and Jason fingered off a dumb shot missile round straight into the Grikath's tail, blowing the ship apart. He slammed through the spray of wreckage, his shields shorting out from the high speed impact. He felt a whoosh of air as his canopy cracked from the blow. A spread of torpedoes outbound from one of the Kilrathi corvettes streaked past, inbound on *Intrepid*.

"You've got torpedoes inbound!" Jason shouted.

The point defense system of the *Intrepid* kicked into action, sending out a spray of mass driver bolts, blowing two of the torpedoes apart, one of them striking a glancing blow as Grierson turned straight into the attack.

Jason looked over his shoulder to watch and then turned back, yanking his stick into his gut as one of the Kilrathi corvettes loomed up directly in front, diving down in an evasive roll. The ship suddenly disappeared, hit by a spread of torpedoes launched from *Kagimasha*, debris ricocheting out in every direction.

Breathing hard, Jason arced downward, kicking on full afterburner to avoid the wreckage, catching a brief glimpse of a Kilrathi, still alive, tumbling through space, arms flailing, mouth open in a silent scream.

He looked around and realized that nothing was around him. He had lost Doomsday in the confusion and was now heading straight in towards the second moon.

Nothing else was coming up.

Was this everything they had?

He switched through the commlinks. The third Kilrathi corvette was under heavy bombardment, most of the enemy fighters engaging the *Intrepid* and *Kagimasha*, with only six breaking on through to *Tarawa* where four of his fighters were holding their own while the rest of the squadron continued to launch.

He aimed straight in at the moon and accelerated for a quick look.

He pushed on in past the ten-thousand-click mark and down to five thousand, turning on his gun cameras, switching the image to his battle information screen.

Damn, it was a massive shipyard, and he started to count off the construction slips and docks spread out across several hundred square kilometers. And then he saw them, six carrier dock yards, each one occupied by a ship in various stages of construction, well protected inside durasteel bunkers with overhead phase shielding. A spread of missiles appeared on his screen, fired by ground defense, a light patter of long-range laser guns joining in. He started to pull back up. As he turned across the surface of the moon the home planet of the Kilrathi Empire came into view. It looked similar to Earth, a beautiful blue-green sphere, hanging in the blackness. He was tempted to push on in but knew it was useless, and besides, there was a far more important target right here.

He turned and headed back out, the missiles continuing in pursuit but far to the rear.

"Tarawa Combat Information,"

"Tarawa here."

"How goes it?"

"Incoming fighter attack destroyed, lost one fighter, one seriously damaged."

He didn't want to ask who was going to be scratched off the list.

"Uploading additional information on the second moon. Found one hell of a fat and juicy target. Here comes the information, be sure to pass it on to the marines." He hit the upload and within a second a burst signal forwarded the data.

As he continued to climb back out he passed through where the swirling battle had been, only moments before. Several Kilrathi fighters were still making sweeps on *Kagimasha*, which had taken a hit to its main engine. As Jason closed in, a wing of four fighters from *Tarawa* closed and within seconds the fight was over.

"Grierson, you get the transmit of camera footage."

"Saw you going down so I thought I'd listen in."

Jason smiled. Grierson was definitely on top of things, the type of commander who knew when and where to listen and when to move.

"We could set the furballs back months, maybe two or three years, balance the odds up a bit. Not just the carriers but the work yards as well. It's the best damned target I've ever seen!"

"I'll start to soften 'em up."

Pushing the afterburners up, Jason headed back to the *Tarawa*. ♦

Looking Forward:

Minerva Wakes

by Holly Lisle

Coming in January 1994 from Baen Books

Introduction by Bill Fawcett

Minerva and Daryl were ordinary parents with ordinary children and a stiflingly ordinary life. Then things changed and suddenly there's a singing dragon in their bedroom, the kids are kidnapped, and even the good guys want them dead.

This is a novel with great action, wonderful villains, and a sense of fun. In this excerpt we see the children rapidly adjusting to their fantastic environment . . . to the dismay of its normal residents.

A thump followed by a loud crash brought all three children awake and off the floor.

The ambush had worked. Its victim lay sprawled on the stone floor, with a thin trickle of blood oozing from the cut on her forehead.

Janus, Carol, and Barney grabbed hold of the makeshift rope and edged warily up to the fallen figure. Murp skulked along just behind them, hackles raised.

"What is it?" Carol asked.

Barney couldn't even imagine. He was certain that the creature was one of the monsters he'd sensed. She was a girl monster, though—and even with the example of his sister to the contrary, he'd never really considered that monsters might come in boys and girls.

Her eyes were closed, her mouth partway open. She had long, sharp teeth. Not like Dracula's, he thought. More like Murp's—but bigger. Her ears stuck out, curly and furry at the edges like the flowers his mother called



cockscombs. Her hair was kind of brushy, and stuck up. It was plain old brown, except for a black stripe that ran right down the middle. Her hands were big, and her fingers had sharp claws at the ends of them.

Jamie took a walking stick he found propped up against one wall, and poked her with it. She didn't move.

"Maybe she's dead," he said, sounding both scared and a little bit hopeful.

Carol said, "No, she isn't. She's still breathing."

Jamie studied the fallen monster, then nodded. "Yes, she is. You're right. Should we leave her here like this, or should we tie her up?"

"Tie her up," Carol said.

Barney nodded. "Before she wakes up."

Jamie nodded again, looking thoughtful. "Yeah. I think so, too."

They took the twisted sheet, pulled her hands behind her, wrapped the sheet around both wrists a number of times, then tied one huge knot.

"Feet too?" Carol had the other sheet ready.

"Feet too."

All three of them worked at tying her feet.

When they were done, Jamie studied the unconscious monster, then pulled a huge dagger out of the sheath she wore on her belt. He grinned at his brother and sister, and raised the knife skyward with both hands. "Heeccc-yah!" he whispered, and tucked the knife into his belt.

Secret Agents Jeevus, Renskie, and Equator did high-fives.

"Now what do we do?" Renskie asked.

Secret Agent Jeevus crossed his arms over his chest. "We have two choices. We can try to escape, or we can fight."

"Fight?" Carol looked horrified. "We're kids! They're monsters!"

"Yeah, but if we run, we have to get past the castle defenses. If we fight, we might win."

Equator hooked his thumbs under his tunic into the top of his pants. "If we lose, they might eat us."

Secret Agent Jeevus frowned. "Then we'd better not lose. Look." He hunkered down and stared into the eyes of his two cohorts. "This place is made to be defended—and we are in the best location to launch a counterattack. The very best place to attack is from behind."

"We don't have any guns."

"We don't need them. We're in a castle keep," Jamie traced an imaginary diagram on the stone floor with his finger. "We're at the top of a hill. If you look out the window, you can see the wall of the inner bailey below, and outside of that, the wall of the outer bailey. Look out the door, Renskie—but be careful. Tell me what you see."

Carol went over and peeked out the door, then closed it behind her. She reported back. "Just stairs, sir. They go around and around and around—with nothin' in the middle at all."

"Perfect. If more monsters come after us, we can drop stuff on their heads."

On the floor beside them, their captive groaned softly and opened her eyes. She looked up at the three children, her expression bewildered. She tried to get up, and

discovered her hands and feet tied together. "Wha—?" The monster twisted around, fighting to free herself.

Jamie grabbed up the walking stick again and brandished it over her head. "Don't move or you're a goner," he growled. Then he looked at his brother and sister. "The President has asked us to inter... um—interrogate this prisoner. Secret Agent Renskie, take your position."

Carol frowned, her face questioning. Jamie pointed behind the monster. Carol nodded. She glared fiercely at the creature on the floor, and walked around behind it. "Don't move." She made her voice as tough as she could.

Barney looked at his older brother. "You have to hold the secret weapon, Secret Agent Equator," the unflappable Jeevus said.

Barney picked up the cat, and Jeevus nodded gravely.

"Very good, Equator."

Then Jeevus spoke into the air. "Yes, Mr. President," he said solemnly. "We'll get her to confess, sir." He saluted, and Equator, who was trying to keep the "secret weapon" from struggling too much, saluted too.

Jeevus, still clutching the stick, knelt just out of the monster's range and took a deep breath. Then he said, "Give me your name, rank, and serial number, monster. The Geneva Convention prohibits torture, but we will do what we have to do to complete our mission."

"Are you children crazy?" the monster asked.

"We are not children," Jeevus said, and narrowed his eyes in an impressively spylke manner. Equator liked the expression well enough he tried it out himself. "We have captured you, and you will tell us what we want to know."

"Are you going to untie me?"

"We make no promises, monster. But if you cooperate, we will... um... we will take that into account."

Barney recognized the lines from the cartoon "Dan Steed, Kid Detective." After Dan Steed said that, the bad guy, who'd been holding a kid and her father prisoner until they told him where to find the buried treasure, had sneered and said, "I'll never tell you nothin', you rotten kid."

But this captive just sighed. "Right," she said. "My name is Engrawll. My personal identification credit number is 505-2-10347-21. I don't have a serial number, so that will just have to do. My rank is Childstrider, First Class." She pulled her lips back in a terrible smile that showed all of her teeth to best advantage. "And as your Childstrider, I have to tell you—you're in big trouble."

Jeevus laughed coldly. "So your name is Engrawll, is it? Hah! A likely story," he sneered.

Equator thought his big brother's answer that time was pretty good, too. He imitated the sneer and the cold laugh, and said, "Yeah. A likely story."

Renskie maintained her fierce silence.

"Now we want the truth. What is the secret password? Where have you hidden the treasure? How many of you are there? Who is your leader? Why do you want to take over the world?" Jeevus glowered down at the prisoner and tapped his foot.

Dan Steed always tapped his foot.

"Those are silly questions—and my head hurts. Untie me." The monster glared at Jeevus.

Jeevus glared back. "Right, then. Renskie—torture the prisoner."

Renskie looked panicked. She shrugged at her older brother and spread her arms wide. "How?" she mouthed.

Jeevus rolled his eyes and sighed. "Do I have to do everything?" He walked around the downed monster, being careful to keep his distance. When he drew even with her rump, he lifted his stick.

Thwack! Jeevus smacked her once with the stick. "What is the password?" *Thwack!* "Where are the secret passages?" He lifted the stick a third time and brought it down with an especially vigorous stroke. "Who is your leader, and where is he hiding?"

"Little boy," the monster said, and her eyes glowed incredibly green. "I'm about to get angry. You wouldn't like me when I'm angry."

Barney froze. Those words were straight out of the incredible Hulk. Of course, the Incredible Hulk started out as David Banner—who was a wimp. Secret Agent Equator thought hard. After David Banner was a wimp, though, he *became* the Hulk, who was great if he was on your side . . . but not too good if he was coming after you.

Jamie gave the monster another smack on the rear.

The monster looked really angry.

Murp, in Barney's arms, hissed. The monster was not a wimp like David Banner. Did that mean she would become something worse than the Hulk? He shivered and stared at her. Barney had known some bad feelings in his short life—the one he got at that moment made the rest of them seem like nothing.

The monster started to shift and twist—Barney was pretty sure she was going to turn into the Hulk, sort of, but really hard. He dropped the cat and picked up the heaviest thing he could find that he could pick up—a stone doorstep—and dropped it on her head.

The prisoner's face slammed into the floor, and her eyes closed.

"Shit!" Jamie yelled. "What did you do that for, poop-face?!" She was gonna talk.

"She was gonna turn into the Hulk, moron."

Jamie put his hands on his hips. "Yeah, right. Asshole."

Carol's mouth dropped open. She stared at Jamie.

"Awww—I'm telling. Mom is gonna kill you when she finds out you said that. Jamie."

Jamie's cheeks turned red, and he glared at his sister.

"How's she gonna find out, huh, shrimp? You better not tell."

Barney was unruffled by his brother's insults. "I told you about the ghost, didn't I? If you hid in the closet with Batman and me, it wouldn't have got you."

Jamie shut up.

Barney loved it when Jamie shut up.

Carol, however, gave Barney a disbelieving look, then turned to Jamie, the former enemy. "He thinks Batman lives in your closet?"

"He thinks a lot of things," Jamie muttered. The older boy shrugged. "He was right about the ghost coming for us, though. And it didn't touch him 'til after he came out of the closet."

Jamie knelt beside the still form of the monster. "She's going to be trouble when she wakes up. We need to lock her in here and find someplace else for us."

Barney picked up Murp, and asked Jamie, "Do you think she was really our babysitter?"

Jamie frowned. "Probably not. But if she was, she couldn't have been much worse than Louise Simmons."

All three children lifted first and fourth fingers and touched their noses, a gesture Jamie once told them was supposed to ward off evil. Most of the kids in the neighborhood did it every time they saw Louise—it made her crazy, which was why they did it. Not even Barney really believed that she was going to turn into a witch on her eighteenth birthday and eat the neighborhood children. At least, he didn't believe it very much.

"Grab her legs," Jamie said.

Barney and Carol grabbed the monster's legs and started tugging. Jamie pulled on her arms. The stone floor was smooth—they slid her away from the door without too much difficulty.

"Get the bedspread."

The two smaller children dragged it over, and all three of them spread it out on the floor, then rolled her up in it like a mummy.

"That ought to slow her down," Jamie's voice changed—suddenly he was Jeevus again, brushing imaginary lint off his shirt and plotting the overthrow of monsters.

"Now, men," he told them, "we reconnoiter the lower regions of the castle. Keep quiet, keep close to me, and watch out for boobytraps and ambushes."

Renskie and Equator lined up behind him. Equator carried the secret weapon, who had calmed down.

They skulked out the door onto the landing. A massive stone staircase curved around and down—it had no railing and the center was a straight drop to the ground. Barney made the mistake of looking, then backed against the wall so fast he slammed his head on the stone. Jeevus was still staring down over the edge.

"Man—if we only had supplies, we could hold this place forever." They closed the door to the tower room, then all three of them together dropped the big wooden bar into the brackets set in the stone.

"Onward," Secret Agent Jeevus said, his whisper sounding small and scared in the dark, echoey tower.

"Onward," Secret Agent Renskie repeated.

"Onward," Secret Agent Equator said, and clutched the cat tighter. ♦

Tomorrow's Books

January 1994 Releases

Compiled by Susan C. Stone
and Bill Fawcett

Piers Anthony: *Killabyte* Ace SF, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$5.50. The virtual-reality computer game of Killabyte is exciting and fun, until a psychotic hacker infects the system with a virus that traps players in the system and forces them to play under his new rule . . . if you lose, you die.

Michael August: *Scream #2: New Year's Evil* Z-Fave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$5.50. When teens ask a young witch to teach a bully a lesson, the spell results in murder and the price of the magic is very high.

Nancy Baker: *The Night Inside* Fawcett Columbine Horror, hc, 320 pp, \$20.00. A graduate student is kidnapped to nourish a captive vampire. And the only hope for either of them is to trust each other, and work together to escape.

Hans Benmann: *The Broken Goddess* Roc Fantasy, tr pb, 1st US edition, 240 pp, \$8.00. A young man, speaking about fairy tales at an academic conference, is asked whether he believes in them. When he follows his questioner he is drawn into a fairy-tale world, where he begins a quest, exploring his new, magical reality.

David Bischoff: *Aliens: Genocide* Bantam SF, pb orig, 336 pp, \$4.99. The fourth book in the *Aliens* series. Every one wants the new drug, Fire, distilled from the essence of the alien's body

chemistry. But the only place to get it is the world of the alien hive-mind, where the death of the Queen has thrown the two strains of aliens into civil war.

Michael Bishop: *Philip K. Dick Is Dead, Alas* Orb SF, tr pb reissue, 352 pp, \$12.95. Originally published in the U.S. as *The Secret Ascension*. An alternate history novel that pays homage to influential SF author Philip K. Dick.

Don Callander: *Geomancer* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. After the Pyromancer Douglas Brightglad is kidnapped by the members of the Stone Warrior Tribe, he seeks a Geomancer to lift the curse that transformed them into giant living statues. Sequel to *Pyromancer and Aquamancer*.

Orson Scott Card: *The Call of Earth* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 352 pp, \$5.99. Book Two in a new five-book series. After the events of *The Memory of Earth*, the Oversoul grows weaker and a great warrior begins to gather an army to attack the city of Basilica.

Orson Scott Card: *Simultaneous* series tie-in reissue of *The Memory of Earth* pb reiss, 352 pp, \$5.99.

Jack Chalker: *Shadow of the Well of Souls* Del Rey SF, tr pb orig, 352 pp, \$10.00. Book Two in a new *Well World* trilogy. An unknown force has changed the complex programming of the Well, altering even the supposedly unchangeable Nathan Brazil.

C. J. Cherryh: *The Goblin Mirror* Del Rey Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$5.99. When three princes set out on an

ill-fated quest, their salvation is in the hands of a witch's apprentice, who has a shard of the goblin queen's magic mirror and plans to challenge the queen herself.

Bonita Clifton: *Time of the Rose* Love Spell Timeswept Romance, pb orig, 400 pp, \$4.99. In this time-travel romance, a woman tracks a time-traveling gunslinger back to the Old West.

Helen Collins: *Mutagenesis* Tor SF, 1st time in pb, 352 pp, \$4.99. A female geneticist must ignore the dictates of patriarchal colonial leaders, and escape arrest, to explore a long-lost colony.

Susanne Dawson: *Awakenings* Love Spell Futuristic Romance, pb orig, 384 pp, \$4.99. A fantasy romance about a woman who returns to her ancestral home and discovers sorcerous powers that can bring her people peace.

Elisa DeCarlos: *Strong Spirits* AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 160 pp, \$4.50. In this sequel to *The Devil You Say*, Aubrey Arbuthnot's father's ghost has decided to keep an eye on his son and heir . . . and being haunted and poor may be more that Aubrey can bear.

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Seed Upon the Wind* Tor Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 320 pp, \$4.99. Book II of the *Talismanian*. Allison Carver, holder of the Cup of Clay, must leave her home in Minnesota to heal damage to the enchanted land of Veil.

Carole Nelson Douglas: *Simultaneous* series tie-in reissue of *Cup of Clay*, Book I of the *Talismanian*, pb reiss, 416 pp, \$4.99.



Key to Abbreviations

hc hardcover, almost always an original publication

pb orig paperback original, not published previously in any other format

pb reiss paperback reissue, designating a title that was previously published in paperback but has been out of print.

pb rep paperback reprint, designating a title that was previously published

in hardcover or trade paperback (sometimes expressed as **first time in pb**)

tr pb trade paperback, a format using pages larger than a paperback but generally smaller than a hardcover, with a flexible cover.



David Drake's *Tyrannosaurus* Tor SF, pb orig, 224 pp, \$4.99. A big game hunter is offered the chance to go after the highest predator of them all.

David Drake's *The Voyage* Tor SF, hc, 448 pp, \$23.95. Set in the universe of *Hammer's Slammers*, *The Voyage* tells the story of a mission to recover a stolen fortune, taken to the Lost Colony long ago. It's expected to be a hopeless quest, even for the toughest mercenaries in human space.

Thomas A. Easton: *Seeds of Destiny* Ace SF, pb orig, 272 pp, \$4.99. When Engineers discover that a species ingeniously seeded by the Gypsies (genetic scientists) is on the verge of becoming a technologically advanced civilization, the Engineers set out to destroy it. Set in the world of *Sparrowhawk* and *Tower of the Gods*.

Teresa Edgerton: *The Grail and the Ring* Ace Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. In this sequel to *The Castle of the Silver Wheel*, an ancient ring casts magical adept Gwerilant of Celydion into the Shadow Realm. There she discovers how to defeat the vampire-like monster preying on the children in her realm, but before she can use that knowledge she must find the hidden way home.

Raymond E. Feist: *The King's Buccaneer* Bantam Fantasy, 1st time in pb, \$4.99. A new novel set in the popular world of *The Riftwar Saga*. A young prince and his faithful squire face raiders sent by the dark magical forces that threaten the kingdom of the Isles.

Raymond E. Feist: Series tie-in reissue of *The Riftwar Saga*, including:
Book I, *Magician's Apprentice* 1st paperback publication of the author's preferred edition, \$5.99.

Book II, *Magician's Master* 1st paperback publication of the author's preferred edition, \$5.99.

Book III, *Silverthorn* \$5.99.
Book IV, *A Darkness at Sethanon* \$5.99.

The sequel to *The Riftwar Saga*, *Prince of the Blood* \$5.99.
Alan Dean Foster: *The Spoils of War* Del Rey SF, 1st time in pb, 304 pp, \$5.99. Book 3 of *The Damned*. In this conclusion to the interstellar war series, the alien Weave worry that their Human allies may not be able to adapt to peace.

Alan Dean Foster: Simultaneous reissue of *A Call to Arms*, Book 1 of *The Damned*, \$5.99, and *The False Mirror* Book 2 of *The Damned*, \$5.99.

Debra Fowler: *Darkness* Pinnacle Horror, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.50. A lonely girl discovers her seemingly perfect new boyfriend is a devil-worshiper who has given his life and death to Satan, and has to kill to stay alive.

Diana Gabaldon: *Voyager* Delacorte Press Time-travel Romance, hc, \$21.95. Sequel to *Outlander* and *Dragonfly in Amber*, Volume 3 of a time-travel romance series about 18th-century Scotland.

David Gemmell: *Waylander* Del Rey Fantasy, 1st US pb, \$5.50. After the king of Drenai is assassinated, the kingdom is invaded by deadly enemies and the only one who can save the Drenai is Waylander—the assassin who killed the king.

L. A. Graf: *Star Trek #68: Firestorm* Pocket SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$5.50. Captain Kirk and his crew must mediate a dispute between a geological survey team and the leader of a commercial colony on a world where the largest volcano in the known galaxy is about to erupt.

Jason Henderson: *The Iron Throne* Bantam Fantasy, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.99. A Shakespearean-inspired high fantasy adventure. After the destruction of Scotland's mad king, the Prince of the Dark

Elves begins his attack on humanity. Only Macduff, Thane of Fife, can lead the forces who would stand against Darkness.

Robert E. Howard & L. Sprague de Camp: *Conan #8: The Usurper* Ace Fantasy, pb reiss, 256 pp, \$4.50. When he's betrayed by a jealous king, Conan kills his royal enemy and takes the throne, only to find unexpected dangers.

Zach Hughes: *The Omnificence Factor* DAW SF, pb orig, 256 pp, \$4.99. Exploring the Dead Worlds for traces of technological civilizations is dangerously successful for the mixed expedition of Old Earthers (who mutated to survive Earth's poisonous atmosphere) and New Ones (who left before mutation meant survival).

L. Dean James: *Summerland* AvoNova Fantasy, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.99. When a conspiracy of alien magical technologies causes an endless summer—a drought that breaks down human society—one woman must cross into unknown otherworlds to find desperately needed rain... and discover the key to humanity's salvation.

Diana Wynne Jones: *A Sudden Wild Magic* AvoNova Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 416 pp, \$4.99. When mages of a nearby universe create environmental catastrophes on Earth, a secret society of female conjurers sets out to stop them.

Jayne Ann Krentz: *Sweet Starfire* Warner Futuristic Romance, pb reiss, 384 pp, \$4.99. Reissue of the first book in the *Lost Colony* trilogy of futuristic romances. One of the first romances with a science fiction setting.

Christopher Kubasik: *Earthdawn: Mother Speaks* Roc Fantasy, pb orig, 416 pp, \$1.99. A novel set in the world of the new FASA role-playing game, *Earthdawn*.

Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon: *The Black Gryphon* DAW Fantasy, hc.



416 pp., \$22.00. A story of the prehistory of Valdemar, set more than 1,000 years before the other books in the series, when magic is a wild and uncontrolled force. The Black Gryphon is a magical creature, bonded to a human, heroically fighting to save his creator and his world from devastating war.

Mercedes Lackey: Series tie-in reissue of *The Last Herald Mage* series, including:

- Book 1: *Magic's Pawn* \$4.99
- Book 2: *Magic's Promise* \$4.99
- Book 3: *Magic's Price* \$4.99.

Simon Lang: *Hopeship* Ace SF, pb orig. 240 pp., \$4.99. In this 3rd adventure of the starship *USS Shipjack*, injured second officer Dao Marik is the prime suspect in a series of murders on the hospital ship *USS Hope*.

Richard Laymon: *Savage* A Thomas Duane Book, Horror, hc, 352 pp., \$21.95. A boy who witnessed Jack The Ripper's last murder in England follows the killer to America to put a stop to the killing.

Holly Lister: *Minerva Wakes* Baen Fantasy, pb orig. 320 pp., \$4.99. Minerva is an ordinary wife and mother, separated from her kidnapped children, and fighting for her life on the wrong side of an alternate universe because she was mistakenly given a powerful ring that can be used to make and shape worlds. She'd do almost anything to get her life back to normal, but the ring is worthless, even to its Makers, until the previous wearer, Minerva, is dead.

Holly Lister: Author tie-in reissues of *Fire in the Mist* 301 pp., \$4.99, and *Bones of the Past* 336 pp., \$4.99.

Brian Lumley: *Ship of Dreams* Tor Horror, pb orig. 256 pp., \$4.99. Sequel to *Hero of Dreams*. In the second of four volumes of new series set in H. P. Lovecraft's Dreamlands, David Hero and Eldin

the Wanderer journey to the floating city, Scrammian, and confront the Queen of the Zombies.

Thomas K. Martin: *A Two-Edged Sword* Ace Fantasy, pb orig. 272 pp., \$4.99. A sleep-research experiment transports a college student to a magical realm where he's hailed as the hero—the Dreamer—foretold in an ancient prophecy, who must lead the forces of Light in their battle against Darkness.

Ashley McConnell: *Quantum Leap: The Wall* Ace SF, pb orig. 256 pp., \$4.99. An original novel based on the TV series *Quantum Leap*. In this adventure, Sam leaps into the life of Missy Robicheaux, first when she's only six, and again 30 years later because her destiny is linked to the political situation surrounding the rise and fall of the Berlin Wall.

Jack McKinney: *Hostile Takeover* Del Rey SF, pb orig. 368 pp., \$5.50. The Black Hole Travel Agency Book 4. In this conclusion to a funny SF series about a nasty alien travel agency, and its efforts to turn Earth into an alien tourist attraction, rebels of all species begin their assault on Light Trap, the Black Hole Travel Agency's Dysonsphere stronghold.

Sean A. Moore: *Conan The Hunter* Tor Fantasy, pb orig. 256 pp., \$4.99. A jeweled bracelet bought from a thief leads Conan into danger and royal intrigue, as he searches for the killer of a princess.

Janet & Chris Morris: *The Stalk* Roc SF, pb orig. 256 pp., \$4.99. The conclusion of the *Threshold* trilogy. Test pilot Joe South returns from his visit with The Unity with a request that sets human factions against each other.

Janet & Chris Morris: Simultaneous series tie-in reissue of *Threshold* 256 pp., \$5.50, and *Trust Territory* 272 pp., \$4.99.

Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle:

The Gripping Hand Pocket SF, 1st time in pb, 400 pp., \$5.99. Sequel to *The Mote in God's Eye*. 25 years after the alien Mones were quarantined, the wall between them and the galaxy is beginning to crumble.

Andre Norton with Patricia Mathews & Sasha Miller: *On Wings of Magic* Tor Fantasy, hc, 448 pp., \$23.95. *Witch World: The Turning* Book 3. In this conclusion to the latest *Witch World* trilogy, survivors of the magical havoc of the Turning begin the struggle to rebuild.

A. J. Orde (Sheri S. Tepper): *Death for Old Time's Sake* Fawcett Mystery, 1st time in pb, \$4.50. Another mystery starring antiquies dealer/sleuth Jason Lynx, by successful SF/Fantasy author Sheri S. Tepper.

Michael O'Rourke: *Darling* Harper Horror, pb orig. 320 pp., \$4.99. Evil forces threaten a TV journalist who's come to isolated Spirit Lake to recover from the injuries and strain of an assignment in Dubrovnik. And a mysterious, ghostly beauty appears, searching for answers to the horrors that happened at Spirit Lake long ago.

Dan Parkinson: *The Swordsbeath Scroll* TSR Fantasy, 320 pp., \$4.95. A descendant of dwarven rulers, Derfin finds himself the unwilling leader of a city of former slaves and the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy: to reunite the bickering dwarven clans and be their king. Book Three of the DRAGONLANCE® Dwarven Nations Trilogy.

Linda Piazza: *Call of the Deep* Avon Flare, YA Horror, pb orig. 160 pp., \$3.50. A mysterious force calling from the water draws people to a deadly danger.

David Pierci: *Forever Yours* Harper YA Horror, pb orig. 240 pp., \$3.50. A young genius brings his dead girlfriend back to life, only to find she now needs to kill to stay alive.



Nicholas Pine: *Terror Academy: Night School* Berkley YA Horror, pb orig, 192 pp, \$3.50. A girl starts night school to try to bring up her grades, only to discover the most handsome teacher in school is a vampire.

Jerry Pournelle, creator, with S. M. Stirling, Judith Tarr, Susan Schwartz, and Harry TurtleDove: *War World: Blood Vengeance* Baen SF, pb orig, 400 pp, \$5.99. A *War World* multi-author novel. For 300 years the Saureons have ruled Haven, destroying all technology except their own. Now the tribes of Haven, united under Aiysha, have given the Saureons their first defeat. Next the humans plan to take back their world... and begin their bloody revenge.

Jerry Pournelle, creator Series tie-in reissue of *War World: Blood Feuds* 560 pp, \$5.99.

Jerry Pournelle & S. M. Stirling: *The Children's Hour* Baen SF, pb reiss, 320 pp, \$4.99. Author tie-in reissue of a novel of the Mao-Kzin Wars.

Jerry Pournelle & S. M. Stirling: *Go Tell The Spartans* Baen SF, pb reiss, 352 pp, \$5.99. Author tie-in reissue of a novel of Falkenberg's Legion.

Mike Resnick, editor: *By Any Other Name* DAW SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. An anthology of "What If?" stories about famous personalities from Hollywood and History.

Bruce Richards: *The Nightmare Club #8: Deadly Stakes* Z-Fave YA Horror, pb orig, 224 pp, \$3.50. The stakes get unexpectedly high when a teen starts running a gambling operation at the Night Owl Club.

David Alexander Smith, editor: *Future Boston* Tor SF, bc, 384 pp, \$22.95. A collaborative novel set in the Boston of 100 years from now created for David Alexander Smith's *In The Cube*. Geoffrey Landis, Steven Popkes, and

Sarah Smith combine their talents to create stories of this enormous future Boston, inhabited by millions of beings—human, cybernetic, and alien.

Mark & Julia Smith: *Shadow-Maze* Questar Fantasy, pb orig, 320 pp, \$5.50. Four travellers must enter the Shadow-Maze to find the lost magic needed to defeat a powerful, insane enemy who threatens their world.

Christopher Stasheff & Bill Forest: *Wing Commander II: End Run* Baen SF, pb orig, 320 pp, \$4.99. The human fight for survival against the alien Kilrathi depends on a surprise attack.

Simultaneous series tie-in reissue of *Wing Commander I: Freedom Flight*, by Mercedes Lackey & Ellen Guon, 304 pp, \$4.99.

S. Andrew Swann: *Emperors of the Twilight* DAW SF, pb orig, 288 pp, \$4.50. Sequel to *Forests of the Night*. In New York sixty years from now a bio-engineered operative, designed for survival at any cost, is targeted for death by an unknown enemy.

S. Andrew Swann: Series tie-in reissue of *Forests of the Night*, \$3.99.

Michael Swanwick: *The Iron Dragon's Daughter* AvoNova/Morrow Fantasy, hc, 464 pp, \$23.00. A human change ling girl is an abused slave in a dragon factory, until an old and broken dragon lures her to escape, and help him in his quest for revenge. A mix of technology, dark fantasy and even darker reality.

Judith Tarr: *Lord of the Two Lands* Tor Historical Fantasy, 1st time in pb, 416 pp, \$4.99. This historical fantasy novel tells the story of how Alexander the Great claimed the throne of Egypt.

Bernard Taylor: *Charmed Life* Leisure Horror, pb orig, 368 pp, \$4.50. It seems like nothing can kill Guy Holman... and nothing can protect the ones he loves. The destiny of millions of people is

in his hands, but whether that's a miracle or a curse remains to be seen.

Karen E. Taylor: *The Vampire Legacy: Blood Secrets* Zebra Horror, pb orig, 304 pp, \$4.50. The first book in a new series about a sexy female vampire living in Manhattan.

Harry TurtleDove: *Worldwar: In the Balance* Del Rey SF, bc, 496 pp, \$21.00. In this alternate history, just as World War II is at its height, lizardlike aliens began their own invasion. The battle between the Allies and the Axis powers is forgotten as they ally to face a common enemy, with plans to conquer Earth.

Kathy Tyers: *Star Wars: The Truce at Bakura* Spectra SF, hc, 368 pp, \$21.95. The first follow-up novel to the *Star Wars* trilogy. The threat of alien domination forges a truce between the Rebel Alliance and the Empire.

Connie Willis: *Impossible Things* Spectra SF, pb orig, 496 pp, \$5.99. A collection of 11 stories by award-winning author Connie Willis.

Gene Wolfe: *Lake of the Long Sun* Tor SF, bc, 352 pp, \$21.95. In Book 2 of *The Book of the Long Sun*, a young priest's deal with a wealthy, corrupt Blood sends him on a quest to discover the hidden secrets of his world.

Edited by Jane Yolen: *Xanadu 2* Tor Fantasy, hc, 228 pp, \$18.95. An anthology of original fantasy stories and poetry. Contributions by Ursula K. LeGuin, Barbara Hambly, Patricia McKillip, Diane Duane, and others.

David Zindell: *The Broken God* Spectra SF, pb orig, 704 pp, \$5.99. When the genetically altered humans of the winter world of Icefall are devastated by a plague, one young man sets out to save them, though it means leaving his home-world to battle a light that is consuming worlds and suns in its destructive path.

Time and Tide



Michael Beres

Along the coast, on the southeastern edge of the county, the sea had invaded the valleys, isolating many of the hills and making them into islands. Roads and fences and power lines plunged into the water at the base of one hill and emerged from the water at the base of the adjacent hill. At high tide, with partially submerged dead trees near shore and green meadow above, the flooding was reminiscent of the purposeful damming of a river valley to change the river's movement into electricity and to create a recreational inland lake. But at low tide, when the erosion and destruction of once-fertile farmland bared its jagged teeth of denuded bedrock, it became clear that mother nature had been fooled with, and the result, in this county, was a series of malformed offspring once called The Hills but now called The Islands.

The last village in The Hills to go under was named High Ground by its founders who had no idea how ironic the name would one day become. High Ground was not yet totally submerged, and at low tide, the steeples of two of its churches—those made of stone—could be seen. The highest ground in High Ground had served as its

Michael Beres: *Up and over mountains*

cemetery and was now part of the seashore scenery on the side of the hill where young people from the village once parked and made love in the front seats of fossil-fuel-powered automobiles on warm summer nights. At high tide, only the tallest of the grave markers in the cemetery were visible above water. But at low tide, all of the markers could be seen. Many of the markers had been toppled by the motion of the sea, and those still standing were at odd angles and were draped in algae and kelp and sea moss. Because several hills stood between the High Ground cemetery and the open sea, the action of waves had not yet unearthed any remains. But a severe storm was forecast, the first severe storm since the failure of a breakwater constructed years earlier that had linked together several of the outlying islands. Because of the impending storm, descendants of High Grounders, some of whom lived on nearby hills that had not become islands, were concerned for the graves of their ancestors.

He sits alone at his desk looking out the window where he has a clear view down the hill to the seashore and the islands beyond. He lives in an apartment complex built by speculators, prior to the beginning of the coastal flooding, to take advantage of people looking for a new place to live. The speculators had theorized that those losing their homes would want to stay nearby—safe, high on this hill, but close to the submerged remains of their old homes.

Unfortunately, from the point of view of these speculators, the flooding came in stages over a period of many years, and most of those forced from coastal homes had been provided time to think, time to get used to the idea of leaving the area and starting out fresh. That is exactly what most did. As a result, outsiders whose occupations allowed them to work at home—especially those who wanted a quiet place on the coast to live—found rents quite inexpensive at the complex and moved in despite initial misgivings about the solitude and loneliness of the place.

He never had such misgivings. Since he was a child he had dreamed of being alone, so that now he quite enjoys the fact that he is somewhat isolated twenty miles along the ridge road that connects the nearest inland town to the apartment complex and several cottages sharing the hilltop. When the insurance company he works for offered work-at-home options during a leaning-out process, he jumped at the chance.

Next to him on the work table against the wall is the computer linking him to the home office. He is working on a program designed to establish an audit trail of a series of homeowners' claims transactions resulting from property losses due to excessive heat in the southern states. Because the results of the program test module he has submitted are not yet available, he stands and walks through the apartment to the door.

He is tall and slender with dark hair and dark brown eyes. He wears a blue shirt and tan slacks. He puts on a floppy brimmed hat and sunglasses. Because it is February, he puts on a light jacket but discovers it is warmer than he thought when he gets outside. He leaves the jack-

et unzipped and walks down the hill on a worn path in the tall grass. Behind him, the apartment complex is silent, and there are no movements of coming or going, not even a curious face at a window.

She sits cross-legged in a winged chair that was once red but has faded unevenly to various shades of pink. Her sand-colored hair is gathered in a loose pony tail, her eyes are blue, and she wears a loose-fitting green jumpsuit that clashes terribly with the colors of the chair. The keyboard from her computer is in her lap, and she pokes at the keys while looking toward the monitor a yard away on her desk. The monitor is large, but the screen is filled with detail, and she squints at it, looking like a mother about to scold her child.

An article about investing in vacant land is on the screen, and she edits the summary sentence that reads, "Investors whose goals are long-term may look to southern states," and changes it to read, "If you plan to invest for a retirement at least thirty years into the future, vacant land in southern states might provide surprising growth potential, assuming recent climate models predicting the long-awaited cooling trend are correct."

A bit wordy, she thinks, but she needs to fill the column, and her boss likes it when she sticks with traditional jargon. She enters the edited article into the format and brings up the entire newsletter panel to see how it looks, colors and all. Then she swings her legs out from under her, places the keyboard on the desk, stands and stretches, her fingertips almost touching the sloped ceiling of the room.

Her work room is in the loft of the small A-frame cottage. She stands at the railing for a moment, looking out across the living room through the floor-to-ceiling windows facing east. In the distance, at the side of the hill just below the apartment complex, she can see someone walking. Because of the tall grass and the crest of the hill, she can see only the top half of the person—tan hat and jacket—and, since the complex is nearly a quarter-mile distant, she cannot tell whether the person walking down from the complex is male or female.

She goes to the stairway of the loft—a steep ship's ladder—and descends quickly with both hands on the railings. She retrieves a sweater from the closet and puts on a straw cartwheel hat with a broad brim. On the way past the table near the door, she picks up her sunglasses and puts them on. Outside, on the small porch, she slips on the sweater, more for protection from the sun than for warmth. Although it is overcast, she knows the dangers of ultraviolet rays and always wears protection when venturing beyond the UV glass of her A-frame in daylight.

The cottages and the apartment complex are grouped in a mile-square area on top of the hill. These groupings, repeated on other hills in the county, are often observed from airliners, vividly illustrating the effects of humankind's fear of rising seas. Although the sea level could never reach even halfway up some of these hills—unless whole continents were to become scattered islands—residences have been built on the tops of the hills. When it comes to selecting coastal building sites, *high and dry* is a term that

will linger for decades, no matter the predictions of the eventual leveling out and the slow fall of sea levels throughout the world.

Because of the gentle slope of the hill on the sea side, virtually all of the cottages and all of the apartments in the apartment complex offer a clear view down the hill all the way to where the sea laps at its underpinnings. This new seashore is at the High Ground cemetery and, because it is low tide, anyone who might care to look out their cottage or apartment window would see, far down the hill, the dots of grave markers poking up through the waves in the shallows. A low-tide mud flat, with exposed bedrock here and there, extends a hundred feet or so between the cemetery and the grassy shore.

A young woman and a young man walk toward one another on the grassy shore. Despite the overcast sky, both wear sunglasses and hats with wide brims. The man and woman approach one another, their presence at the foot of the hill most likely unnoticed because it is near noon, a time when most residents of the cottages and apartments are asleep behind closed curtains, resting up for the busy worknight ahead.

* * *

Several yards back from the high-tide mark, an outcropping of rock connected to the bedrock below forms a one- to two-foot-high ridge paralleling the shoreline. The thin-bladed grass on the hill is taller around the rocks, because the herd of cattle from a local farm that are let out each night to graze avoid the rocks. The cattle avoid these low rocks because the rocks give unsure footing, especially in the dark, and because the abundance of hybrid UV grass on the gentle slope of the hillside makes it unnecessary to graze here.

As the man continues to approach, she stops, finds a flat-topped rock of the correct height and sits on it. She stares out at the island-dotted sea. The smell of rotting fish is in the air, and she can see a line of small decomposed fish at the high-tide mark, as well as several larger carcasses on the mud flats. A few gulls poke at the carcasses. In the distance a single gull screeches as if in pain.

Now the man is near enough for her to hear his feet in the grass above the sounds of the lapping waves. She turns and watches his approach. He stops several feet away and smiles at her.

"Good morning," he says, lowering his sunglasses for just a moment and looking at her over the top of the frames.

"Good morning," she says, lowering her sunglasses in the same way, so he can see her eyes for a moment.

Neither of them removes their hat or reaches out to shake hands. Except for the momentary lowering of sunglasses during this greeting, their hands have remained hidden in their pockets and, because neither has worn gloves, their hands hide there now.

He selects a rock near hers—this one not quite as flat and somewhat lower—and sits. Although they are about two feet apart, the combined roofs of their broad-brimmed hats make them seem closer together. They are silent for a minute or so after this initial greeting. Then she speaks.

"I heard on the weather forecast earlier that there's supposed to be a storm tonight."

"It seems calm enough now," he says.

"The calm before the storm," she says. "Too bad about the poor gulls."

"What about them?" he asks.

"Storms are hard on them. When I was a little girl I remember there used to be so many of them. UV has damaged their eyes. Some say a lot of them are lost in storms, apparently because of their lack of direction and inability to find shelter."

"Who does the scavenging now?" he asks, motioning with a nod of his head toward the shore.

"Sea creatures at high tide. Worms and such at low tide."

"Sounds rather slimy," he says.

"It is."

"What about the cemetery? When you were a little girl was it above water?"

"Yes. We used to visit my uncle who lived in the village. That was when the dikes still held back the sea."

"What happened to your uncle when the village was flooded?"

"He built the cottage up on the hill. When he died he left the cottage to me. He was a loner. I guess he thought I was a loner too."

"Are you?" he asks, turning toward her.

"Yes. When they gave me the chance to work at home, I moved here with my computer."

He does not look back out toward the sea but remains turned toward her, and she can see two identical tiny women in broad-brimmed hats reflected in his sunglasses. These miniatures of herself look insignificant yet hostile, like blind scavengers caught feeding upon his eyes, like the scavengers beneath the carcasses on the mud flats.

The two of them continue staring at one another, not seeing eyes and not seeing hands, which are hidden, his in his jacket pockets, hers in the deep pockets of her jumpsuit. An airliner approaching the new inland airport passes overhead, its whine similar in pitch to the scream of the distant gull. They do not look up toward the airliner, and after it passes, they begin to smile. Neither is able to remember how this smiling began, nor who began it.

He asks, "How come you aren't fast asleep like all the normal people?"

She answers, "Because I'm not normal."

"What do you do when you're not out here looking at the sunken cemetery?"

"I edit a financial newsletter for a company that moved their corporate headquarters inland from New York a few years back. I'm on coffee break, only I don't drink coffee. What's your excuse for not being normal, and why haven't I seen you out here before?"

"I moved in only a week ago. I'm a software analyst for an insurance company. They recently started a work-at-home program." He turns and looks out toward the sea. "I lived near the sea during my childhood and thought I'd never return."

"Did you lose your home to the sea rise?" she asks.

He continues staring east toward the islands, the intervening sea, the markers of the submerged cemetery. "Yes. I also lost my parents. I was away at college in Vermont

and received the news from classmates who heard it broadcast on the morning news. They lost their home and their business. My parents ran a bed and breakfast on the Cape. It was lost in one of the landslides. I'd like to say my parents were killed that way, by the infamous act of God, but I can't. They committed suicide."

He turned to her. "I don't know why I've told you all this."

"Perhaps because, like me, you work alone and have time to think introspectively and no one to tell things to." "If I come out here for a break each day, will I be blind- ed like a seagull?"

"You'll be okay," she says, "as long as you wear your hat and glasses."

"We have UV glass in the apartment complex. What about your cottage?"

"I had it installed shortly after I moved in."

At some point, perhaps when speaking of his parents' suicides, his smile disappeared, but now it is back again and she imagines that he is sorry she has UV glass in the cottage, because that would have given him an excuse to invite her to his apartment. She turns from him and looks east again.

She says, "My great-grandparents and other long-lost relatives are in that cemetery."

He says, "I thought perhaps there was a reason for your uncle, then you, deciding to live on this hill."

She says, "Now that you've been here a week, do you still think it best to be alone?"

Instead of answering, he stares out at the cemetery. She turns and looks there too. Something moves in the water near one of the toppled headstones, and she is startled because of what at first looks like a decomposed arm giving a quick overhand thrust as if trying, by swimming upward, to pull the rest of the body from the mud below. But then she realizes it is a sea catfish feeding in the shallows and feels both relieved and foolish. As she turns to look at this man next to her, she also feels foolish that she has not introduced herself and decides to do so, until she sees him startle and slowly walk away. He climbs steadily up the hill without looking back.

As she walks up to her cottage, the dead calm from earlier ends, and a northeasterly breeze begins sporadically at her back until, when she reaches her door, it blows steadily and briskly.

* * *

That night she sits alone in the dark, listening to the storm outside the cottage. The wind makes the peaked roof of the A-frame creak and moan. The rain against the east windows rumbles. Earlier, before she turned out the lamp, she was able to see the flexing of the floor-to-ceiling windows as the wind grew stronger and stronger.

Earlier this evening, while others were starting their worknight, she listened to the wake-up newscast and was told, at one point, of a Kansas State University professor's satellite research program claiming that climate models predicting an upcoming leveling out of the sea rise had been in error. A more realistic scenario, according to the professor, would be for the seas to rise at least another meter before the long-awaited leveling out would begin. Now she sits and thinks about this in terms of the man

she met that morning. At high tide, another meter of sea rise would have put the shoreline beyond them, and, instead of sitting on the outcrop of rock, they would have been the sea catfish wallowing in the mud and feeding on whatever might be on the bottom, even—

As the storm continues, she cannot help thinking about the cemetery and the possibility that the remains of her ancestors might be disturbed. Not that she is close to her family. She hadn't even attended the reunion held in the north end of the county last fall, and she is certain her parents and her brothers still consider her a recluse and a fool for accepting the desires of a mad uncle's will and living alone in the cottage.

As she lies in bed, the wind blows very hard, and she thinks she can feel on her face the movement of air within the cottage. It is as if she is in a coffin, a coffin being invaded by the storm, a coffin that will soon be ripped open, the storm scattering her remains. An arm here, a leg there, her head snapped off and washed onto the debris-strewn beach where the gulls—

Except for a brief glimpse when the man lowered his sunglasses that morning, the dark lenses had hidden his eyes. She tries to imagine the color and depth and emotion in his eyes but cannot. She had also worn sunglasses, the two of them hidden from one another, as if they were sea creatures living at the lower depths. Perhaps he has been washed ashore and, if the glasses are removed, she will see that the gulls have done their work before she has a chance to look into his eyes!

It is a nightmare. She awakens startled, imagining that she and the man really are in the sea. The sea has risen even higher, and all creatures live in the sea, creatures for whom time and tide and wind are not so important, creatures for whom evolution sometimes finds backward steps more advantageous than forward steps.

She can no longer sleep. She lies on her side, so that the drafts on her face are less apparent. She listens to the storm and watches the journey of the clock. She becomes fascinated with observing the passage of time and wonders why she has never felt this way before. If she were to attempt putting her feelings into words, she might say she has an unconscious apprehension that something is going to happen. She is like an ancient mariner sensing land before it is sighted.

She sniffs at the air and can smell the sea. The surface of the sea is being whipped so ferociously by the gale that, even here, closed up in her cottage, microscopic droplets reach her nostrils. As the night wears on, with the sound of the wind at the slope of the roof resembling the sound of being submerged in water, she begins to imagine herself as a kind of seagoing mutant, that single mutant who first left the womblike sea and crawled onto land.

In the midst of this reverie, which takes place in a state of being half awake and half asleep, there is a banging at the door of the cottage.

She lifts her head from the pillow and listens. She is alone, not in the sea, not a mutant, but a financial newsletter editor coming awake from insane dreams caused by a storm. Yes, the storm.

But the banging starts up again, louder than before and

obviously the rhythmic and insistent pounding of a human fist

She turns on a lamp, puts on a robe, turns on more lamps as she walks to the door. It is the worknight, she tells herself. Others are out working, and this is one of them. But when she opens the door he is there, steady-ing himself in the door frame, the wind blowing at his back.

When she steps back, he steps forward and pushes the door closed behind him. He is dripping wet and stands for a moment staring at her. Without the sunglasses he wore that morning, his eyes are dark, filled with emotion and concern and kindness. He is wearing a yellow sou'west-er and slicker like those left behind in the back closet by her uncle. He takes off the sou'wester. His hair is black and wet.

"Some of the people in my apartment building woke me up. Apparently the cemetery is in trouble, and they need volunteers. I don't know how you feel about things like this, but I thought since your ancestors are buried there you might want to help, or at least know about it."

"I was lying awake listening to the storm. Of course I'll help. Are there—bodies?"

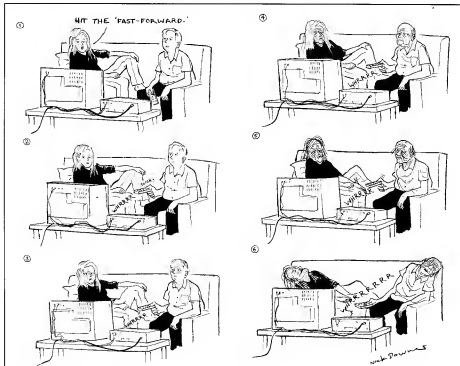
"No. The coffins are washing ashore. No time to get equipment down there, so I guess they're tying on ropes and pulling them to high ground."

She looks down, sees his hands holding the sou'west-er. They are muscular, veined hands.

"I'll be right back," she says, and runs to the bedroom to change.

While he waits, the door rattles violently behind him, and he turns to look at it. In the small triangular window on the door, he can see his reflection against the dark, stormy night. He is smiling and, having become aware of this, he smiles all the more.

In a little while she is there again, running through the living room as she pushes her arms into a yellow slicker. They both put on sou'westers and go out into the storm. Together, running away from the lighted windows of the A-frame in the storm, the two look like ancient, rubber-winged birds of prey. ♦



The Semen Thief

Eleanor Arnason

There was a woman who is nameless now. She belonged to a small lineage in a remote part of the third continent. The area was troubled by strange behavior and supernatural events, and this may explain what happened to the woman.

Her lineage was defeated in a war. As is customary, the men who belonged to the defeated lineage were killed, and the women and children adopted by their victorious neighbors. But this particular woman refused to join her new family. The ghosts of her dead male relatives haunted her, whispering angry ideas.

She went off by herself into the mountains and lived like an animal. But this wasn't enough to satisfy her. In the dark forest, the ghosts drew closer and became more real.

This is how it is with ghosts. We are not haunted by what is good and happy in our dead relatives. After the time for grieving is over, these beneficent aspects or qualities move away from us into whatever country the dead inhabit. At most, they visit us briefly in dreams. But the parts of our relatives which were bad and unhappy—their anger, hunger, malice, pain, the quarrels that were never settled, the longings that were never fulfilled—these are reluctant to



Illustration by Carol Meyer

leave. If we let them, they will stay in our houses and villages and assume the forms of the people who died, though they are not the dead, but only shadows or vestiges.

The nameless woman sat alone by her fire night after night, and night after night her dead kin came and stood at the edge of the firelight in bloody armor. Their hoarse voices gave her bad advice.

The lineage which had been destroyed should be recreated. It was her duty to breed a new family.

"How?" the woman asked. There were men living in the mountains, outlaws and perverts, who might be willing to mate with someone like her. But these would be bad fathers. She didn't want their traits in her new lineage. No ordinary decent man would father a child unless the women in his lineage had arranged a breeding contract. For this is the way that breeding has always occurred. The decision lies with women, and the agreement is between families rather than individuals.

The ghosts said, "There is a woman living in this area who knows magic and is untroubled by ideas of right behavior. Go to her and ask for help."

"Very well," said the nameless woman, and she went and found the sorceress in question.

This person lived in a cave or deep hole, which the nameless woman entered. At the back was a low fire, and the sorceress crouched there. She was huge, more than twice the size of an ordinary woman, and the cave—though fairly deep—was not large. Her head brushed the ceiling. An unpleasant odor came off her, like meat that is starting to go bad. She wore no clothing, and her skin was entirely bare. She had no fur. Not a hair.

A disgusting spectacle. The nameless woman wanted to turn and flee. But she was held in place by anger and a desire for revenge.

The sorceress lifted her horrible bald head. "What do you want, little one?" Her voice was deep and harsh.

The woman explained her problem: she wanted to recreate her lineage, but she needed fathers who came from good lineages and had good traits, so her children would be strong and intelligent.

The sorceress thought for a while, wrinkling her hairless forehead. Then she said, "I have come up with a plan. First of all, you must disguise yourself as a man. Do you think you can do this?"

The woman said, "Yes."

"Then you must set up an inn on a road that has some travelers, but not many. Can you do this?"

"Yes."

"Finally, I will teach you to make five potions. The first will put men to sleep. The second will dazz them, so they don't understand what is going on. The third will make them feel lust. The fourth potion you must take. It will ensure fertility. The fifth potion is a never-failing poison.

"Now, do exactly as I tell you. After you have built your inn, set up as the innkeeper and wait till a man arrives who is traveling alone. Talk with him. Find out his lineage and what kind of journey he is on. The best kind of man will be far from home and far from the end of his journey. If he vanishes, no one will know where it happened. You won't fall under suspicion.

"Once you have picked your man, give him the sleeping potion and then drag him to a room remote from all the others. Chain him there. When he wakes, give him the second potion. When it is obvious that he has become confused, give him the third potion and take the fourth yourself. Soon it will be possible to mate with him. No matter how careful and decent he is, he will respond to my magic.

"After you have gotten what you want from the man, you must kill him."

The nameless woman made a noise of protest.

"This must be done. You can't keep him prisoner in the inn. What if the other guests found him chained in a back room? It would certainly make them wonder what you've been up to. If you let him go, he will return home and report what's happened, as well as he can remember, and his lineage will send people to investigate.

"Most likely, the man will go to sleep after you have mated. You can strangle him or cut his throat. But if he remains lively, coax him to take a drink of my never-failing poison. Even a drop will finish him.

"Now," said the sorceress. "There is one final thing you must do. By this time, you will have gotten everything you need from the man, but a lot of him remains, and this is my portion.

"After the man is dead, go outside—making sure that no one else is around, of course—and call me in the following manner:

"Old Bald Pate, hairless one,
come and gather another man."

"If you follow my instructions exactly, you will live to see yourself surrounded by children."

The nameless woman agreed to all this. She learned to make the magic potions and then went off to build an inn next to a rarely traveled road. When the inn was built, by her own effort entirely, except that the rear part was a natural cave, she assumed the guise of a man. This wasn't difficult for her. She was shorter than usual for a woman and lacked the sturdy build that is characteristic of most females, and her breasts were small and flat. All she had to do to be mistaken for a man was to wear a thick vest.

She took Hrul Atig as her name and said that she was one of those men who enjoy solitude and don't have a lot of interest in fighting. She had left her lineage, with their permission of course, and wandered into the mountains. And because she wanted to do something useful, so long as it didn't involve warfare or too many people, she had established this inn.

She waited patiently for the right kind of man to arrive. He came finally, young and handsome and from a good family, traveling alone on a long journey.

Hrul Atig did as she'd been told, and everything happened as the sorceress had predicted. After they had mated in the back room under the mountain, she strangled him. He was the only guest at the time. She walked fearlessly out into the daylight and called.

"Old Bald Pate, hairless one,
come and gather another man."

An instant later, the sorceress appeared. Before when Hrul Atig had seen the woman, she had been crouched in

a badly lit cave. Now she was upright under the sun. Her four limbs were bony and knobby. Her four breasts hung down like empty bags. Her belly drooped. Below it, her female opening was clearly visible. Unprotected by fur and surrounded by wrinkled skin, it was entirely unattractive. Worst of all, it seemed to the nameless woman, was the color of the monster's skin. In the few places where bare skin shows in ordinary people—the palms of the hands, the soles of the feet, the insides of the ears, the four large nipples—it is always dark. But the monster was pale and blotchy like a bank of old snow.

The sorceress grinned and gathered up the dead man. Then she said, "If you ever need me for any kind of help, go outside and call."

"Naked Breast, old hairless one,
help your helper at a run."

Then the monster loped away over the mountain, carrying the dead man in her arms.

The nameless woman felt horror at what she'd done, but also satisfaction. That evening she cleaned the inn, then burnt the murdered man's belongings in a fire, along with all other evidence of the murder. The ghosts of her dead relatives gathered at the edge of the firelight. Glancing up, she saw their torn clothing and broken armor and the dark blood which shone in their fur. "Our new family has begun," they told her, and they praised her courage and determination.

After a while, it became evident to the woman that she was pregnant. But she was one of those women who don't show early, and she continued to run the inn. Finally one of the travelers, someone who had been at the inn before, remarked in a joking way that Atig was getting portly and this was no good thing in a man so young.

Hrul Atig waited till the traveler was gone, then called the sorceress, using the new verse. At once, the monster appeared, looking as horrible as before, though better fed.

"What am I going to do?" asked the nameless woman. "I'm not going to be able to pretend to be a man much longer. And who will help me bear the child?"

"You really aren't very bright," said the sorceress. "And this doesn't bode well for the children you bear. But maybe intelligence will come from the father. Shut up the inn and put a notice on the door, saying that you have gone to visit your lineage. You will be able to keep living here, if you keep an eye out for travelers and hide when they come by. As for help in childbirth, call me." And then the monster leaped up the cliff in back of the inn, and that was the last of her for a while.

The nameless woman did as she was advised. At the end of fifty days, she felt the pains which accompany birth, and cried out:

"Naked Breast, old hairless one,
help your helper at a run!"

The monster arrived and helped with surprising skill. The child, when it appeared, was female and covered with lovely soft pale grey fur. No mother could wish for a better-looking child. Hrul Atig's mind filled with happiness.

The monster stayed until Hrul Atig was up and about. Then she said, "My advice to you is to reopen the inn as quickly as possible. If you bind your breasts and pad the

nipples, people won't notice that you have milk. And the child can stay in the back of the inn. I have brought her something to play with." She opened a bag and spilled out bones, as white as fresh snow. The child, young as she was, seemed able to focus her eyes. She looked at the bones and made a cooing noise.

"What are these?" asked Hrul Atig, with a feeling of horror.

"Her father's bones, which I have cleaned and polished. I can tell you don't like them. But if you want my help to continue, you will let the child have these toys. I promise you, they will keep her quiet."

Reluctantly, the woman agreed. The inn was reopened. The woman returned to her male disguise, and her child played in the back room with the bones.

For many years after this, the nameless woman kept her inn. She was always careful and patient in what she did, and no one realized that she was the cause of men vanishing in that range of mountains. The young man I have told about was only the first. Others fell victim to her potions and died and were carried off by the sorceress. Other children were born. Some were male, and these the woman killed, following the advice of the sorceress.

"It's better to have girls if you want to recreate your family. These male children will not increase the size of the lineage-to-be. Kill them, and try again."

But there were a number of female children, all of them healthy and good-looking. When there were no guests around, they played throughout the inn and in the surrounding forest. When travelers came, and the children could smell them at a long distance, the girls would withdraw to a special room deep in the mountain which their mother had built for them. There they played with the polished bones of their fathers.

* * *

Now the story turns in another direction, to the lineage named Hrul which actually existed, though its home country was nowhere close to the forest where Hrul Atig kept her inn.

The Hrul were a very small family, whose land consisted of a single valley. A rare kind of tree grew in their valley. The Hrul gathered bark from this tree and cooked it, making a dark blue dye which was highly valued throughout the entire region. They survived as a lineage because of their skill in making dye, and also because they had always had excellent relations with the neighboring lineages. This was so in spite of the odd problem the family had: the women of Hrul bore almost no male children. It made no difference who the father was. He might come from a lineage that produced mostly boys. Such exist, and they are very much pitied. But if such a man mated with a woman of Hrul, the result was almost certain to be a daughter. So Hrul had no warriors to protect them. Instead, they relied on intelligence, friendliness and their craft.

Because there were so few men in the lineage, the women took on activities that are usually considered male. They hunted and patrolled the edges of their country and did the kinds of work that most families considered too dangerous for women: topping large trees, taming violent animals and so on. The only male activity they did not take

up was war. It wasn't necessary for them, since they got along with their neighbors, and they considered it unwomanly. Their few men were sent to the neighboring lineages when they reached adolescence and learned soldiering there. When their neighbors formed armies, the men of Hrul joined them, out of gratitude for their training and as repayment for the protection the neighbors gave to Hrul.

So this was the lineage whose name had been stolen by the nameless woman. It was many years before they heard about the inn in the wilderness, but finally a merchant came to purchase their fine blue dye and mentioned that he had met a relative of theirs in a distant part of the mountains.

Because they had so few males in their family, they kept track of all of them. They knew at once that this person was no true member of Hrul. They said nothing to the merchant, who was male and a stranger. But after he had loaded his animals with bags of powdered dye and ridden off, the Hrul gathered in council. There were only two men present: an old lame great-uncle, and a lad just returned from military training. The rest were women of all ages. As a group, the women of Hrul were large, with grey fur that was usually solid but sometimes had barely visible stripes. Their hands were dyed blue from their craft, and the color extended up their arms to the elbow.

They gathered in the main room of their one great house. A fire burned in the fireplace. Their eyes, blue like their hands, shone with reflected light. The lad, as grey as smoke and slender, leaned against a wall in back of his mother. The great-uncle sat stiffly in a chair.

This was a bad situation, the senior women declared. A large lineage was like a tall mountain: visible from a distance and known to everyone. Its true nature could not be hidden. Its reputation could not be destroyed by accident or rumor or the actions of a handful of people.

But their lineage was small and almost unknown. A single person could ruin their name, and it was obvious that this innkeeper was up to something. Why else would he be about his family?

They talked back and forth, wondering out loud what the man was doing and why he had picked their name to hide behind and make dirty. The two men remained silent, until the conversation became repetitious. Then the boy looked restless, and the great-uncle spoke in his light, quiet male voice. "You are settling nothing, and nothing can be settled until we have more information. A person must be sent to investigate."

The boy offered to go, of course. The women looked at each other with consternation. He was so young! It was hard enough to send him off with their neighbors, who were good soldiers and could be relied on to take care of him. But to go alone into the wilderness—

The boy's elder sister leaned forward. According to the story, she was one of the daughters of Hrul who behaved in a male fashion, hunting and logging in the high forest above Hrul Valley. "If we knew for certain that the man needed killing, then we could send my brother. But we don't know this as yet. I suggest that I go. Everyone knows that I am comfortable in wild country. My dreams are often useful, and things appear to me which are invis-

ible to other people. These are the kinds of abilities our envoy ought to have. Let me find out what's going on. Then we can decide what to do about the man."

It was true that she had the kinds of abilities that are most often found in diviners. But her gift was erratic and could not be relied on. Nonetheless, she was strong and clever and resourceful. She had been bred once and produced twin daughters, who were healthy but not remarkable. If she did not return, her genetic material would not be lost to the lineage, but there was no obvious reason to heed her again. By this time, the daughters had been weaned. Her female relatives were raising them, since she was not especially maternal. A good person to send, the women decided after more talk.

"There is a problem," the great-uncle said. They all looked at him. "If the innkeeper knows anything about us, it is that we make dye. If our kinswoman appears with blue hands and arms, he will be suspicious."

"What shall we do?" the women asked.

"Dye her. Not blue, but black. It will cover the blue. Our kinswoman can say that she comes from the southwest coast of our continent. The people there have dark fur. Some are almost black."

"And I suggest, as well, that she take men's clothing and a traveling sword." He looked at the sister. "Put these on before you reach the inn. The innkeeper will be more comfortable with another man and more likely to tell you his story. But don't change clothes until you are almost at the inn. It's too dangerous to travel as a man."

All this was agreed to, though it was some time before the woman was able to leave. First her relatives had to dye her, then she had to learn how to wear male clothing. She was slender enough to pass for a tall man, and (as mentioned before) she had spent much of her life doing things that were violent and dangerous. She knew how to use an axe and a long hunting knife. Blood did not bother her. She could move quickly and climb well. A good choice for this journey, her great-uncle said. If any woman could carry forward this deception, she was the one.

She left finally, riding a hardy *tsin*, a second animal following her. Her male clothing was in its pack, along with a sword.

At this point, she needs a name. After her story became known, people—though not her relatives—began to call her Blue Hands, and this name will be used here.

Why Blue Hands if she had been dyed? Because the dye had taken hold everywhere: except on her few areas of bare skin. Her nipples and the soles of her feet were still grey, as were the insides of her ears. The palms of her hands were blue-grey, and there was a definite blue tinge to her narrow, curving, clawlike fingernails. This would not show in firelight, her great-uncle said. "Be careful in daylight, and take gloves."

Her journey was a long one, and she had adventures, which will not be told here. In the end, she arrived in the area where the innkeeper lived. This was her last day as a woman, at least for a while. She made camp in a little hollow off the trail, and ate the food she had brought: hard bread and dried fruit. Night came. She built a fire and sat by it, watching the flames.

After a while, she got the impression she was being looked at. She glanced up. Men stood at the edge of the firelight. There were maybe ten of them.

"Who are you?" Blue Hands asked.

One of the men took a step forward. He was young and handsome, dressed for travel in shorts and a jacket and high soft boots. A sword hung from his belt. He met her gaze directly. "Greetings, woman of Hrul."

She knew then he was a ghost. No ordinary man would have known her family name, and no ordinary man would have looked directly into the eyes of an unrelated woman. "What do you want from me?" she asked.

"We have been watching along this road, some of us for years, looking for someone to deal with the innkeeper. We think you are the person and that you ought to know what lies ahead of you."

She opened her mouth to speak, though she wasn't certain what words would come out.

A second man stepped forward, almost as dark as she was in her disguise. His clothes were richly embroidered in an unfamiliar way. His voice had an accent. "We know the reputation of ghosts is not good, and for the most part, that reputation is merited. The innkeeper is haunted by ghosts who are as bad as can be imagined. We are not going to haunt you or give you advice. Our days for advising and being advised are over. But listen to our story."

Another voice, speaking out of the shadows, said, "All of us ask this, woman of Hrul."

She agreed. "Will it bother you if I put more wood on the fire?"

"A little more will not be a problem," said the first man, who was silver-grey with faint markings on his arms and shoulders: large, cloudy-looking spots that were shaped like broken rings. "We are most comfortable in shadow. Don't fill this hollow with light."

She added two branches. They caught. The fire brightened, and it became less easy to see the ghosts. But they remained, most of them, anyway, and they told Blue Hands how they had been trapped and killed.

The story was painful to hear and must have been painful to tell, even for ghosts. But their voices were quiet and even. They remained at the edge of the firelight, most standing, but one squatting as people do on the high plateau, rocked back on his heels and looking comfortable. No one moved much. What excellent manners they had! What a pity they had died in such a way!

Each man had been traveling alone, they said. Usually the inn was empty when he arrived, though several times there had been other travelers at the inn, who left without noticing what was going on.

The innkeeper made each man welcome.

"Though he didn't seem to be the kind of man who finds it easy to be friendly," said the man with spots. "I wondered about that, but maybe he felt that an innkeeper ought to be friendly. Or maybe he was lonely. The Goddess knows it is a lonely place!"

They sat together, drinking and talking. If there were other people in the inn, the innkeeper paid only as much attention to them as he had to. It was clear that he was interested in the solitary traveler.

"Maybe that should have warned us," said the man who was squatting, his arms resting easily on his thighs. "But all of us were young and good-looking. We were used to attention from other men. Not until too late did any of us discover that the innkeeper was actually a woman disguised as a man."

In the end, the traveler fell asleep, sometimes in the common room of the inn and sometimes upstairs. When he awoke, he was in a new place entirely.

By this time the fire had burned down a little, and it was easier to see the ghosts. A new man spoke. His fur was grey with faint stripes. A fine sword with a golden hilt hung at his side. A necklace of gold links shone at his throat. "This is where the story becomes difficult to tell," he said. "Most of us spent the rest of our lives, which were not long, crazy in one way or another. We don't remember those last few days with any clarity. But I was one of the first to be murdered. I saw what happened to the men who came after me. Let me tell this part of the story."

When the traveler woke, the striped man said, he was in a new place: a cave in the mountain behind the inn. The walls and floor and ceiling were solid rock. The man was naked, without anything that could be used as a tool or weapon, and held by a chain made of thick iron links. At one end was an iron ring, fastened around his ankle. At the other end was an iron bolt, sunk deep in to the wall.

"You have to remember," said the striped man in his quiet voice. "The room was entirely dark. Everything I tell you was happening in darkness and in silence, except for the noise that each man made. Some of us were quiet, so there was only the sound of breathing and the clinking of the chain as we moved. Some of us called for help or cried out in anger or groaned in fear."

Another man spoke out of the shadows. "It was not a comfortable situation. There is nothing shameful about being afraid, so long as it does not affect one's actions."

The striped man glanced toward the speaker in the shadows and smiled briefly. "As you might be able to tell, he was one of the quiet ones. Even his breathing remained even and slow."

"I lacked imagination," the speaker in the shadows said. "Everyone in my family told me this. When I was put into an unusual situation, I became slow and quiet, because I had no idea what else to do."

Usually, the man was fed a second portion before he woke properly. He went directly from sleep into craziness. Sometimes, the innkeeper was delayed, and the man woke fully and realized his situation. If the man explored, feeling his way around the unit room, he found nothing except a basin cut in the rock floor and full of a liquid that had a faint sweet odor. If he drank the liquid, he went crazy.

Two men refused to drink. So they had clear memories of the innkeeper when she returned, carrying a lantern. She entered through a heavy door made of wood and iron, which none of her prisoners had been able to reach. The chain was not long enough. She stood at a safe distance, holding up the lantern and looking, then asking questions to determine whether or not the prisoner was crazy. If he was still rational, she said, "I am a murderer and a thief, as you may suspect by now. There is no way

out of this situation, except death, and you might as well take dying into your own hands. The water in the pool is poisoned. Scoop it up and drink it. Otherwise, you will die slowly of thirst and starvation and without the satisfaction of determining your own moment of death."

The man who was squatting said, "Maybe I shouldn't have listened to her. But I could not imagine what was in her mind. And given the choice, every man prefers to keep hold of his death."

Another man came forward, shorter than the others, his fur solid grey. "I did not drink even then. She waited till thirst made me weak, then came and fed me her potion, and I went crazy like all the others."

It was not a useful kind of craziness. The man became confused and suggestible, unable to think for himself. It was easy for the innkeeper to persuade him to drink yet another potion. This one caused lust.

The second potion did not wear off. The man remained crazy, unable to distinguish good from evil or dreams from the waking world. While he was in this condition, the innkeeper mated with him, though there was no contact between their families, and the man was not able to understand what was happening or to agree to it.

The dark man said, "I remember strange animals and landscapes such as I have never seen, and then I thought I was with my lover at home. But when I began to make love with him, he turned into a monster, and it seemed that the monster was sucking everything inside me out, though not through its mouth but rather through another opening in another part of its body." He paused and glanced down, then back up, meeting her gaze with pale yellow eyes. "Everything came out of me. I was like a bag made of skin. Empty."

The striped man said, "When she was finished with us, she killed us, and she called the witch who was her teacher: a horrible big hairless creature. The witch came and carried our bodies away. She flayed us and tanned our skins. Our flesh went into her cooking pot. Our bones she cleaned and made into toys for our children to play with."

That was the end of the story. The woman of Hrut put more wood on the fire. The ghosts became indistinct, drawing back into the forest shadow.

"This may be untrue," she said finally. "You may be trying to trick me into evil. On the other hand, my family believes this innkeeper is up to something. But I think I will have to take a look myself."

"As we told you before," the dark ghost said, "we haven't come to advise you. But I will say this: be careful and observant. Remember our story! And remember that we can do nothing in the world of the living. You will be on your own in dealing with the innkeeper, though we will try to keep the ghosts who haunt her at a distance. They hang around the inn and watch what is happening there, and they give the innkeeper advice and help. If they are unable to get close to her, she will be less dangerous, we hope."

"If everything turns out well, and you manage to deal with the innkeeper, please take our bones away from our daughters."

"You needn't worry about trying to separate the bones,"

said the spotted man. "We have gotten used to having them mixed together. But burn them and bury the ashes."

The short man said, "I wish we could tell you our names, so our families would learn what happened to us. But that doesn't seem to be possible. When I try to speak my name, it vanishes from my mind. At times, I think I can remember where my family lives and who is in it. But at the moment, all of that is unclear, as if they were creatures in a dream or I am a creature in a dream."

She glanced down, tired and distressed. When she lifted her head, the ghosts had vanished. Grey dawn was showing between the trees. Her fire was out, and she was sprawled next to it.

Blue Hands sat up and rubbed her body. She felt as if she'd been lying all night on the cold ground. Maybe the ghosts had been a dream, though a dream that was so vivid and full of detail had to be taken seriously.

It was obvious what she had to do: dress as a man and go to the inn. The innkeeper's behavior ought to tell her whether or not this story was true.

She reached the inn late that afternoon. It was a small building, solid-looking, set against a cliff wall next to the road, which at this point went through a narrow valley.

Blue Hands rode into the courtyard and dismounted. The innkeeper came out, dressed in a kilt and a vest that was fastened across the front with chains. He was tall enough to be a woman, but not as broad as was (and is) typical of women of the People. He greeted Blue Hands with apparent pleasure, though when he wasn't speaking or smiling, his expression became grim.

She unsaddled her two animals and put them in the stable. There were other *tsina* there already, and a family party was gathered in the common room: two matrons and three young men. Was this lucky or not? wondered Blue Hands. The innkeeper might not reveal his true nature with so much company present.

Blue Hands sat down at a table. She carried a bag with her. Inside it was a cloak and a jug full of *balin*. She had given thought to the story the ghosts had told, and she had devised a plan, though she wasn't certain that it would work.

The innkeeper brought over a meat stew and a goblet full of a liquid that smelled like *balin*. "The others can entertain themselves," he said. "Families always like to speak to one another. I'll sit with you, if you don't object."

"No," said Blue Hands, wondering about the meat in the stew. Was it possible that she was about to eat another person? No way of telling, and the innkeeper would become suspicious if she left the food alone. She dug in.

The young men with the family called for more drink. The innkeeper sighed and got up. While he was gone, Blue Hands spilled some of the liquid in her goblet on the table, then emptied the rest into her bag. The heavy fabric of the cloak soaked it up. Moving quickly, she wiped the goblet out and refilled it with *balin* from her jug. If she was lucky, the scent of the *balin* she had spilled would keep the innkeeper from noticing that her *balin* was not quite the same as his. She smeared the spilled liquid across the table, rubbing it into the wood.

The innkeeper came back, complaining about the de-

mands of the family. Blue Hands drank her *balin*. He sat down and asked about her travels. She told the story she had made up, after speaking with the ghosts.

She came from a small, far distant lineage. (This much was true.) They'd had bad luck in recent years, and the local diviners had not been able to find a cause. Blue Hands was the son of the most important woman in the lineage and had been sent to consult with a famous diviner in the north. She—or rather he—had gotten an answer from the diviner and was going home by the most direct route, though it was more dangerous. "But my family needs to act quickly to end the cause of our bad luck. The diviner has assured me that if we do as she advises, our bad luck will vanish, and we will become known for good fortune." She drank more *balin*. "My family will be surprised! They expected me to take the long route both ways."

The innkeeper looked satisfied and asked her if she wanted more *balin*.

"Yes," said Blue Hands.

He refilled her cup, then went to serve the family. Once again, Blue Hands emptied her goblet, refilling it with the *balin* she had brought.

The innkeeper returned, and the two apparent men continued their conversation. After a while, the matrons in the family went up to bed, as did one of the young men. But the other two stayed in the common room.

"They'll be drunk tonight and sick tomorrow," the innkeeper said, his voice angry. "Men should behave with more decorum when they are traveling with women."

It was excellent good luck that the family was in the inn, Blue Hands decided. Without them, she would have had a difficult time.

The next time the young men called for *balin*, she emptied the innkeeper's goblet and refilled it with the *balin* he had given her. Then she filled her goblet with her own *balin*.

The innkeeper returned. They continued their conversation. The two young men finally had too much to drink, and the innkeeper had to help them upstairs. Once again, Blue Hands emptied her goblet into the innkeeper's.

She had been drinking slowly, but still she had taken in more *balin* than was usual for her, and maybe there had been some residue in the goblet. Her thinking was unclear, and she was having some trouble focusing her eyes. It didn't feel like drunkenness, but rather like taking a medicine. A residue, then. The potion must be very powerful. She closed her eyes, trying to think more clearly.

All at once, she could see the entire inn: the lit common room and the darkness outside it. In the darkness, beyond the outer walls, a battle was occurring. The warriors shone faintly, so she was able to make them out. Her ghosts, the murdered young men, were fighting other ghosts who were dressed in bloody armor. Sword met sword, producing no sound. The men who had been murdered were holding off the other ghosts, keeping them out of the inn, and the situation was clearly making the bloody ghosts angry. Their mouths opened and closed, as if they were screaming or cursing. Blue Hands heard nothing, except the crackle of the fire in the common room. Her ghosts fought with calm determination.

They should not have been able to win against the angry ghosts, since they wore no armor and carried only the short swords that men take with them on journeys. But she could see that they were doing well. Maybe the difference was in the kinds of ghosts they were. Her young men had kept the qualities that relatives like to remember: intelligence, skill, calmness, discipline, comradeliness. The other ghosts were made of everything that should be forgotten about a person once he is dead: anger, malevolence, stupidity, selfishness, lack of skill.

She knew then—looking at the battle that ringed the inn, shining dimly before her inner vision—that the story told by the ghosts was true. The innkeeper was a murderer and a thief, and a woman.

The innkeeper returned, swaying now. "I can't understand it," she said. "I am usually able to drink much more than this."

Blue Hands slouched over the table, keeping her head down so the false man would not be able to see that her pupils were a normal size. Her voice stumbling, she said, "The same for me. I am not certain I will be able to stand."

"In your case, it must be the journey," the innkeeper said, her voice full of satisfaction. "You are tired. Don't worry, I'll help you to bed."

They settled down to drink some more. Every time Blue Hands closed her eyes, she saw the ghostly battle, still continuing in the darkness around the inn.

Finally the innkeeper fell forward, unconscious. When this happened, the angry ghosts all screamed, though their voices were inaudible, and fled into the night. The ghosts of the murdered men remained where they were, swords in their hands, guarding.

Blue Hands made sure the innkeeper was not likely to wake. Then she searched the inn and found the room described by the ghosts: empty except for an iron chain. She carried the innkeeper there and chained her. The basin in the floor was empty. Blue Hands filled this with water, so the innkeeper would have something to drink, and then she went upstairs and found an empty room and went to sleep. She did this out of necessity. Even the small amount of potion left in her goblet had been almost enough to render her unconscious. And she did it out of trust. Surely the ghosts would keep her safe from anything supernatural, and she was not worried about ordinary people.

She woke in the morning before the family did and cleaned the common room. Then she made breakfast and served it to her fellow travelers, saying that the innkeeper—a cousin of hers—was ill. They ate and went on their way, the two young men moving stiffly and wincing from time to time.

While this was happening, the innkeeper woke and found herself in her own prison, chained in the same way as the men she had raped and murdered. She shouted for help. After a while, several of her daughters came out of the room where they played with their fathers' bones. One of them carried a lantern. They opened the door of the prison and peered in.

"Help me," the innkeeper cried.

The daughters consulted together in whispers. One of them spoke finally. "No."

"But I'm your mother," the innkeeper said.

"Our fathers are our fathers, but we play with their bones. Why should we care for you any more than we care for them?"

The innkeeper pleaded, but the little girls would not listen. They left, taking the lantern, and she was in darkness. Now she remembered the monster and chanted the verse which summoned her:

"Naked Breast, old hairless one,
help your helper at a run."

A moment later, the sorceress was in the room with her. She carried no light, but a faint pale illumination shone out of her. As usual, she was huge and hideous, but this time she wore a garment over her nakedness: a robe made of pieces of fur, grey and dark grey, spotted and striped, the pelts of the men who had been murdered. It covered her from neck to ankle, and the long full sleeves came down over her wrists.

The innkeeper explained her problem.

"Too bad," said the monster. "But I think your usefulness to me is over."

"What do you mean?" asked the innkeeper.

"Have you never wondered what I got out of our agreement? I am not able to have children directly. In order to create more monsters, I have to use an ordinary woman. One of the potions I taught you to make changes the child inside you, so it is mine rather than yours. Now I have ten fine young daughters, who will prey on people and cause harm in the world, and I have finished this excellent coat which will keep me warm and covered."

"You are reaching the age when women become less fertile and more likely to produce children who are unhealthy. It's time that I abandoned you."

"But we have an agreement!" cried the innkeeper.

"Surely you don't expect an agreement made with a monster to hold," said the sorceress. She grinned, showing a mouth full of teeth as white as fresh new bone. "Farewell," she said and vanished.

Once again the nameless woman was left in darkness. She screamed and struggled with the chain. Finally, exhausted, she cried out to her male relatives. But the bloody ghosts could not come near her. The ghosts of the men she had murdered held them off.

She ended by sitting hunched on the stone floor and groaning, in a state of complete despair. This was how Blue Hands found her.

"You have choices," Blue Hands said. "I can leave you to starve or I can give you a knife, if you agree to use it."

"My life has been meaningless," the nameless woman said. "My kin have abandoned me. Give me the knife."

Blue Hands threw it to her, and she used it to cut her throat.

When this happened, the ghosts who guarded the inn sheathed their swords and left, striding off into the morning forest. Blue Hands saw them briefly, when she closed her eyes against the sight of the innkeeper spurring blood. The young men faded among the trees like mist in sunlight. After a moment or two, they were entirely gone.

Blue Hands opened her eyes and saw the false man lying in a pool of blood.

She took her lantern and left. After a while, she found the room where the innkeeper's children played. They were there, ten daughters ranging in age from a baby to a tall, thin girl at the edge of puberty. Around them were the bones of their fathers and of other men who had not produced living children. White and polished, the bones filled most of the room. Two of the girls squatted on an empty area of floor and threw knucklebones like dice. Another pair of children had gathered the small, narrow bones that are found in hands and feet and were using them to play a pick-up game. In one corner a tower rose, made of leg bones and arm bones. In another corner was a cave made largely of ribs, with a child of three or so huddled inside.

Blue Hands stood at the door of the room, holding a second knife, feeling horror at the sight, but also disconcerted. The children looked like quite ordinary little girls. They lifted their heads and gazed at Blue Hands.

"Don't kill us," the oldest daughter said. "We had nothing to do with the crimes of our mother."

Her vision failed her then. She did not see the children as monsters, and she could not harm them.

"What will happen to you?" she asked.

"I'm almost grown," said the oldest daughter. "I can care for my sisters, and we have a relative nearby. She's a recluse, but she won't refuse to help her own kin."

Blue Hands gathered the bones of the murdered men and burned them outside the inn. She burned the innkeeper as well and then went on her way, leaving the children. She ought to have cared for them, but she knew there was something wrong with them, and though she could not kill them, she wanted nothing to do with them.

The children fled into the mountains and lived in the high forest like animals. If their true mother, the sorceress, helped them, it isn't known. When they reached maturity, their fur dropped off and they looked exactly like the sorceress, though they did not have her great size and power. They became petty monsters called *thugba*, who prey on children who are disobedient, destructive, uncooperative or lazy. Little boys are especially likely to draw the attention of a *thugba*. Mothers warn their male children if they don't act properly; a *thugba* will come down out of the mountains and carry them off to its lair and eat them, starting at the toes.

The inn fell to ruins, and there were rumors that it was haunted. Travelers tried to get past it during daylight hours. Only a fool would camp near it.

As for Blue Hands, she returned to her family and became an impressive matriarch, respected by everyone in the region.

* * *

This story has five morals.

- (1) Don't let your life be run by ghosts.
- (2) Never come to an agreement with a monster.
- (3) Never breed without a contract.

(4) Don't try to take and use what belongs to other people: their fur, their flesh, their bones or their procreative powers.

(5) Be careful with compassion. There are some things which should not live. ♦

The Last Existentialist

Bruce Boston

The Last Existentialist Eats

eggs for breakfast, scones with dairy butter, sausages as succulent and rich as the tender meat of his life is barren

At the market he is courteous to a fault until the nausea claims him once again, until his being dissolves to nothingness and he windmills down the aisles, a cascade of powdered soups and quilted crackers trailing in his wake.

"Why?" he asks the butcher, the baker, the man who mistis the vegetables with a spray he suspects may contain something more than water.

As the rest of "humanity" rushes or jogs past him, evolving not to rhinos but assorted species



Illustration by Delia Smith

on the insect phylum
—arachnids, fireflies,
killer bees, worker ants—
the last existentialist
continues to stare
unblinkingly into the abyss.

The stars blink back
like burning spurs,
like beacons in the night,
like the stones he once took
for diamonds in a tiara
perched atop the beehive
bouffant of an untouchable
raven-haired prom queen.

The stars blink on
like massive spheres
of flaming incandescent gas,
all their symbolic richness
wrenched metaphorically
from the belly of man.

The Last Existentialist Needs

no introduction to the hell
of life in the twenty-first century,
no exegesis to everyday perdition
in an era when souls are sequestered

and esthetic norms are gross or bland;
he has seen the senseless carnage
and the holocausts at their game,
the grasping maw of mass sentiment

with its displaced righteousness,
its transient whims and stylish rage.
The last existentialist needs
no primer for the public purgatory

of pretense in an era when the surface
of things is the sum of their fame,
no prologomenon to a purblind mor-
ality
based on the satisfaction of needs

as ceaseless and rapacious as rust,
as barren as the mononuclear sand;
he reveals his thoughts to no one,
he dons a shroud of garish taste

and takes his place upon the stage.
The last existentialist needs
no outline for the future heaven
he imagines in wistful or speculative
reveries that invest him despite

his desire to keep them at bay,
no prospectus for his dreams
of a kingdom wrought from reason

where he might step into the light
of day with others of his strain,
arms linked in the tamed humanity
of some glorious and gilded age.

When the Last Existentialist

tires of sensitivity,
of always thinking first,
he resorts to elixirs
illicit and true to alter
or obliterate his reason,
to become less of a mind
and something more of a man,
a heady beast, if you will,
to descend into a maelstrom
of perception and savor
the moment as a dream:
crackling with color,
luculent with sound.

Before the dream expires
and the morning after rains,
he will untomb sensuality
from an airtight cage,
an automated surrogate
tailored to his tastes,
with whom he can engage
in a safe aseptic coupling
of always-ready passion
and scrupulous finesse
that pales any chance
encounter of the flesh.

Yet when his self returns
in its unrelenting way,
his consciousness intact,
his senses back in rein,
and the thing abed beside him
arises from a specious sleep
—porcelain skin untouched,
her eyes a fervent shade—
he envies this creation
and such surety of purpose,
the flight in its desire,
the will of its caress.

If the Last Existentialist

could afford to time trip
he would travel back
to the salad years

of the long dead century
to gorge himself on greenery,
he would dare to explore
the spirit of an age
when thought fell like rain
and the days past tomorrow
were ripe with possibility.

As a ghostly chrononaut
he would dip and hover
at princely Sartre's shoulder
as the master's moving pen
journeyed from nothingness
to being and back again.

Ticketless, he would attend
the ill-attended premiere
of *La Cantatrice Chauve*,
and with a century's hindsight
smile in knowing condescension
as the cautious critics tugged
upon their pointy beards
and scratched their heads.

He would accelerate with Camus
in his fiery and weightless
plunge to famous oblivion,
and shed more than a solo tear
for genius extinguished
long before its time.

He might even manifest
himself as an hallucinatory icon
in a renegade Harvard guru's
altered consciousness,
or inhabit a white room
and perch upon a white piano
where imagination reigned.

And if he could find a way,
he would immerse himself
for an unnoticed moment
in the stream of history
to commit the inimitable act
that could send it running
down a different hill
to a different sea,
warm and pelagic,
blue as an ancient sky,
green as imagination.

He would repack
the baggage of the past
and boot it down
a different set of stairs
to a different landing,
open to the changing clouds
and the spacious air,
bare to the falling rain

DARK SUN

W O R L D

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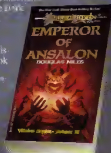
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